Employee Longevity in Difficult Environments

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Concordia University (Portland)
College of Education
Doctorate of Education Program

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Employee Longevity in Difficult Environments

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education
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Abstract

Worker tenure in this country averages 4.5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Stressful work environments cause loss productivity and profitability to companies and a diminished well-being and ill health to employees. Why, then, do some employees remain working in difficult environments despite the dangers to health? This phenomenological study researches reasons employees continued to work for longer than five years in difficult environments. Discussed are impacts of difficult environments on employees and the negative health repercussions experienced. These negative effects are also experienced in organizations through turnover, lower productivity, and reduced profitability. This study incorporates factors of toxic environments on well-being, the effect of corporate culture on employees, the change in employee vision of the workplace and the idea of free agents, generations in the workplace, and Systems Thinking. Elements of the Person-Environment Fit Theory were used to build the foundation and analyze the data. The research identified three industries considered difficult in which to work – outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurant. The phenomenological study analyzes the responses of 25 participants employed at ten different companies deemed difficult workplaces and seeks to determine why they remained in those workplaces for longer than five years. Industries represented included two companies in the outdoor work category, three companies in the manufacturing category, and five restaurants.

Keywords: difficult environment, workplace stress, employee longevity, toxic work environments
Dedication

There were many people who were involved in this journey alongside me. Most of them do not know it. I dedicate this achievement to my kind husband, Kevin, who was my replacement in so many ways as I devoted time to learning and research. To my friend Terri who coaxed me into starting the education journey at 45 years of age and helped to see me through it. To my children who were encouraging and promised I would always be Mom. To my amazing grandchildren, Kairi, Khloe, Stori, and Zach, whom, without their distractions and constant requests for attention, I might have forgotten how wonderful life is and that this journey is just a small part of it. To my family who both supported me and set the example, and to friends who gave me a push or a smile. Cathy and Linda, thank you for always being there.
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I acknowledge my amazing cohort who shared their successes and struggles on this journey, providing me friends for life. And most importantly, I acknowledge and commend the participants of this study who were open and honest about experiences that may have been difficult to talk about. Sharing their story shows how one brave act can provide insights that can help others.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... iii

Dedication ......................................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... v

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem ........................................................................ 1

   Conceptual Framework for the Study .......................................................................... 3

   Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................ 7

   Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................... 7

   Research Questions ....................................................................................................... 8

   Research Design ........................................................................................................... 8

   Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study .................................................. 11

   Definition of Terms ..................................................................................................... 12

   Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations .............................................................. 13

   Summary ...................................................................................................................... 15

Chapter 2: Literature Review ......................................................................................... 17

   Conceptual Framework ............................................................................................... 19

   Literature Review ......................................................................................................... 23

   Factors of Age and Diversity Affecting Longevity ...................................................... 23

   Healthy Workplaces .................................................................................................... 25

   Employee Engagement ............................................................................................... 27

   Toxic Environments ..................................................................................................... 29

   Corporate Culture ........................................................................................................ 32

   Free Agents .................................................................................................................. 34
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3: The Methodology</th>
<th>46</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and Design of the Study</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Population and Sampling Method</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Procedures</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operationalization of Attributes</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis Procedures</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Research Design</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected Findings</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Issues in the Study</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Research and Findings-Introduction</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of the Sample</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants for Outdoor Work</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants for Manufacturing</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants for Restaurant</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methodology and Analysis</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding of Data</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the Results</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of the Themes</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Introduction</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of the Results</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors of Age and Diversity Affecting Longevity</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy Environments</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Agents</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems Thinking</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Further Research</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Research Interview Questions</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Statement of Original Work</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1 – Difficult Work – All Participants................................................................. 66
Figure 2 – Difficult Work by Industry ................................................................................. 67
Figure 3 – Themes based on number of participant responses.............................................. 69
Table 1 – Summary of Participants ...................................................................................... 60
Table 2 – Summary of Generation Differences of Participants ............................................. 61
Table 3 – Summary of Themes ............................................................................................ 82
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem


Additional negative health impacts of a stressful job are seen in eating and sleeping habits and can affect weight (Neel, 2016). Other health concerns due to stress include cardiovascular, obesity, and the common cold (Swanson, 2015). Many working adults believe their job directly impacts their health including how they live both in and out of the working environment (Harvard T.H. Chan study for National Public Radio, 2016). Stress is the cause of accidents at a rate of 60% – 80% and stress is the reason 42% of employees have changed jobs (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). Annually in the United States, more than half of a reported 550 million days of absenteeism were caused by work related stress (McHugh, 2012).

Toxic environments contribute to stressful workplaces. A toxic environment is negative and promotes belittling and condescending behaviors that are disparaging to employees. These environments are often filled with negativity that includes destructive gossip and conniving
politics (Anderson, 2013). The most negative employees in a toxic environment can spread that negativity to other employees and when subjected to this; even the best employees are 13 times more likely to leave the organization (Porath, 2016). Levels of engaged employees in the workplace are at 13% globally which indicates high levels of disengagement in organizations (Crabtree, 2013; Rigoni & Nelson, 2016). The information studied is from Gallup research of 22 organizations containing 49,495 business units with 1.2 million employees in 45 different countries (Rigoni & Nelson, 2016).

The average tenure of an employee in the workplace is about 4.5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Only after the age of 65 does the average tenure increase to about 10 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Yet, there are many who work in jobs despite the difficulties experienced and stay for 20, 30, even 40 years or more and on through retirement. This study investigates the reasons some employees work beyond the average tenure of 4.5 years despite the circumstances, estimated dangers, or risks to health.

This phenomenology research study is designed to explore the reasons some who work in difficult environments stay longer than the average 4.5 years despite difficulties in the workplace. Explored through the study is how some employees adapt to difficult work environments and work longer than the average tenure. The study will be offered to retirees or anyone who previously worked for a minimum of five years as their longest tenure in the perceived difficult work environment. The intent of the research is to provide insights into factors affecting longevity in the workplace. Additional findings may provide helpful insights into reducing stress and health concerns for workers and reducing production loss and turnover costs for organizations that are a result of the difficult environments. The intent is to add research to the field that can provide insight into why some employees remain in difficult
environments long-term and through this information, gain insight to improve the workplace environment.

**Conceptual Framework for the Study**

The conceptual framework for the study is based on the Person-Environment Fit Theory. The premise behind the theory is that an employee is affected by both the characteristics of the environment as well as personal individual behavior (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). The Person-Environment Fit Theory suggests that the characteristics of both the individual and the environment determine individual employee behavior in the workplace (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). There are three main components of the Person-Environment Fit Theory. The first component is based on the concept of needs-supplies. This component suggests that individual needs and the fit with job opportunities create job satisfaction. The second component is the proportional difference which defines needs-supplies by relating it more closely and proportionally to the position. The third component is value-percept which suggests that values are what drive needs in attaining job satisfaction (Schneider & Barbera, 2014).

Described by the theory is the effect of the interactions between values of the employee and how they match those of the culture within the organization. Consequently, people may leave when the compatibility of employee values and the organizational culture are not aligned (Robbins & Judge, 2011). The theory suggests that satisfaction of the employee is determined by how well personality matches the needs of the position. When the fit is not in alignment, both the employee and the organization may suffer (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Optimal alignment of employee and position is achieved by aligning career orientation with career environment (Schneider & Barbera, 2014).
Matching of values with culture is a predictor of job satisfaction, commitment, and low turnover (Robbins & Judge, 2011). Culture refers to the rituals, activities, deep values, and beliefs that grow within an organization and these organizational cultures may create high stressors that lead to even higher strains (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). Robbins and Judge (2011) refer to organizational culture as the stable characteristics of an organization that are rooted in values developed over years which employees hold strong commitments. Bolman and Deal (2013) refer to culture as the experience that creates wisdom and how the ways of the organization transform from old employees to new employees. Research further indicates that the social environment has more influence in the promotion of a bond to the organization and workplace than does culture or leadership (McHugh, 2012). For this study, culture aligns with the Robbins and Judge (2011) explanation as the stable characteristics that are rooted in values which have been developed over years and where employees hold strong commitments to those values within the organization; and the Schneider & Barbera (2014) definition that the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs employees have about workplace experiences are transmitted socially among employees.

Companies spend between $450 and $550 billion dollars per year due to the low levels of engagement because seven out of 10 workers do not perform at full potential (Clifford, 2015). As many as 49% of new employees to an organization experience job failure within the first 18 months and 89% of those are due to poor culture fit (Clifford, 2015). Improving employee engagement has been shown to increase operational metrics including profitability, productivity, safety, attendance, and revenue (Rath & Harter, 2014).

Since employees spend most of their waking hours in the workplace, the act of improving wellness may help to solve the health crisis with a reduction in obesity, diabetes, and heart
disease (Rosenthal, 2010). Career, social, financial, physical, and community are the different elements that make up employee well-being (Rath & Harter, 2014). Personality-job fit shows that employees experience the highest levels of satisfaction and organizations have the lowest turnover when personality and occupation are aligned (Robbins & Judge, 2011). Consequently, employees who are not able to perform in activities they enjoy have a diminished well-being (Rath & Harter, 2014).

Another component forming the basis for the study is the effect of workplace stress on the employee. According to Hans Selye’s General Adaptation Syndrome theory, when not addressed, the effects of stress can remain high causing fatigue, burnout, and dysfunction to occur (Kleinman, 2012). Additional dangers are potential ulcers, stroke, and damage to the brain and heart. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (2016) reported that all people experience stress and anxiety is the response to a stressor. Rath and Harter (2014) conducted a study of workers and diagnosis of depression. They were able to link employee disengagement to increased levels of depression. Employees who were actively disengaged at work were two times more likely to be diagnosed with depression over the course of one year.

Employees are responding to the stress of workplace dysfunction and those ineffective leaders by leaving the job (Pink, 2001). Improving the impact of well-being through our careers can improve overall life and help workers live into their 90s (Rath & Harter, 2014). Jackson, Firtko, and Edenborough (2007), in a review on personal resilience as a strategy for surviving and thriving in the face of workplace adversity, suggested that individuals use resilience to positively adjust to adversity. Recommendations to build personal resilience includes increasing or improving relationships, staying positive, working on spirituality and life balance and being reflective. Lagerstrom (2005) stated that health can be improved by addressing the root of the
problem, the determinant, rather than the symptom. Rath and Harter (2014) state that anxiety and depression may be reduced by boosting well-being in the career of the employee. The effect on health is another component of this research.

In a study on attitudes and social cognition in 1994, Heaney, Israel, and House reported the cost of low job satisfaction on healthcare was $50 billion annually. In 2015, 23 years later, Society for Human Resource Management reported the effect of job satisfaction on healthcare was at $300 billion per year. This represents an increase of $250 billion in 23 years for an average $10.87 billion increase per year. Overall stressors included the negative effects on health, eating habits, stress level, sleeping, weight, social, and family life (Harvard T.H. Chan study for National Public Radio, 2016).

The 2016 Harvard T.H. Chan National Public Radio report shows that of those in low-paying jobs, 51% believe their jobs to be more stressful compared to 41% of those who reported having higher paid jobs. In addition, employees in lower paid jobs believe they face more dangers in the workplace. These employees also are more likely to go to work when they are ill. Workers in dangerous jobs experience a high stress level as well as a negative impact on sleeping and eating (Harvard T.H. Chan study for National Public Radio, 2016; Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). For these employees, 25% believe the workplace is not doing anything to reduce the unsafe practices. Another factor of the stressful workplace relates to workers with disabilities where 62% believe the job negatively impacts their stress.

Dissatisfied employees represent a high cost to organizations (Clifford, 2015). A study on organizational behavior and the human decision process by Porath and Erez (2009) showed that rude and disrespectful behaviors are widespread not only in organizations but in many
countries. Rude acts leave a memorable impression and can reduce observers’ willingness to help (Porath & Erez, 2009).

**Statement of the Problem**

Some employees work long-term in difficult environments where they may experience potential dangers to health and well-being, disagreement of work practices, discontent with leadership, poor management, and overall job dissatisfaction which create disengagement in the workplace (The Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). Rath and Harter (2014) stated that of employees who believed they had incompetent managers, 24% were at risk of health problems and if they had worked for that manager for more than four years, the risk grew to 39%. Combining the different aspects, opinions, or perceptions of workplace concerns through interviewing employees who have worked more than five years in a difficult environment may provide insight into the challenges and reasons for longevity in these environments. The problem is that workers are not staying in the workplace longer than an average of 4.5 years often due to stressful environments. Additionally, workers experience health concerns while working in stressful environments. Through exploration of the experience of workers in these stressful environments, directional insights into difficult environments might be revealed, possibly increasing longevity.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to examine the perceptions of workers concerning the reasons behind long-term employment in what the employee considers a difficult job environment despite the circumstances, estimated dangers, or risks to health. The average tenure for an employee is 4.5 years and at the age of 65 the average tenure increases to 10 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Therefore, understanding the reasons that employees stay in the
identified difficult environments may provide helpful insights into the current environment and the impact on long-term employment. A total of 25 participants will be asked to participate in the study.

**Research Questions**

Employees who work in stressful environments experience negative effects on overall health (Neel, 2016). Because of stressful workplaces, employees either work in a dissatisfied state (Clifford, 2015), or often decide to leave these jobs (Porath, 2016). Turnover in organizations is very costly (Santovec, 2010). However, there are some employees who remain in the workplace for longer periods of time as evidenced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016).

The research questions for this study are:

1. What are the common reasons employees in the fields of outdoor work, manufacturing and restaurants stay in their employment for over five years despite challenging work environments?

2. What commonalities and differences were noted in reasons for remaining in employment for the three different work environments (outdoor work, manufacturing, restaurant)?

**Research Design**

A phenomenological approach is used for this study to explore the experience of workers in stressful environments and the insights they will provide regarding why they remain longer than the average tenure. Phenomenology defines the personal perception regarding the meaning of a particular event (van Manen, 1990).

A study done by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio (2016) sought to identify difficult environments. Researchers for the Harvard study asked
questions about employee perceptions of the workplace and health, health benefits, experiences of sickness while working, the effect of the workplace on health, dangers of the job, impacts of stress, how well the employer supported health, and use of paid vacations. Reported difficult environments included retail outlets, construction or outdoor work, factory or manufacturing, medical, store, warehouse, restaurant, office, and schools. The largest number of health concerns was found in the identified types of workplaces. Of employees who reported health concerns, the numbers were 43% of construction workers, 34% of medical occupations, 30% of factory workers, restaurants and schools equally at 21%, 17% for warehouse professions, 12% of store employees, and 7% of employees in retail outlets. The top five health concerns were chemicals – 30%, unhealthy air – 13%, accidents – 12%, stress – 11%, and sedentary nature – 6%. These numbers also varied based on the actual job type where office workers reported stress at 26% compared to construction reporting dangerous chemicals at 30% (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio, 2016). These stressful workplaces, as indicated by the research, were used to identify targeted industries for this dissertation study.

Individual interviews will be conducted to gather insight into the perspective of participants concerning their previous work environments through the collection of common themes. The interviews will be conducted with participants who were employed five or more years before leaving the workplace. Interviews will be conducted by phone and in person and to participants who were located nationally. The intent of interviews is to explore the perspectives of former employees in organizations concerning their long-term employment in the work environment. The participants must have worked in environments that are identified as difficult in which to work. For this study, these will be construction or outdoor work, factory or

After a consent form was signed, the participant was asked to complete a pre-survey questionnaire. Questions collected from the survey included demographical and work history. Participants who met the criteria of having worked in one of the identified difficult environments and having a tenure of five years or longer will be asked to participate in an interview. The focus of the study is on workers who have been employed in difficult environments. The interviews will be semi-structured and consist of open and closed-ended questions. Participants will be asked questions that lead to communicating their work experiences. Follow up questions will be asked to provide clarification when needed. Husserlian phenomenology highlights the certainty of how people present their consciousness of events. A Husserlian approach will allow participants to express their experiences in their own words through their stories based on pure phenomena (Davidsen, 2013). Once all data is collected, a thematic analysis provides the ability to extract discernable themes (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). The culmination of all data collected will be analyzed based on the responses of participants. A thematic analysis will be used to group and analyze the responses.

Perspective participants of the study are retirees or workers who were employed five years or longer in the perceived difficult environments. Purposive sampling will help to gather a minimum of 25 participants for the study. Small sampling is recommended at 10 participants as larger samples are difficult to manage (van Manen, 1990). Seeking 25 participants will help to ensure there are at least 10 complete sets of data available for the research. Following van Manen’s (1990) research recommendation, interview will consist of open ended questions with the intent to capture self-expression from participants. Initial participants are acquaintances, or
recommendations from acquaintances, who are recent retirees and a chain-referral affect will occur. Additional referrals will be asked of those participants contacted for the study.

Instruments used will include telephone and in-person interviews where the researcher uses printed questionnaires to ask a series of questions of each participant. The demographic information and approvals are achieved through the pre-survey questionnaire. A hard copy of the pre-survey questionnaire will be available for those without computer access or anyone who chooses not to use that method. The expected time for each interview is about one hour. An introduction will be included that explains the research and the participant’s requirement to consent to participation.

**Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

Understanding the reasons employees stay in difficult environments may provide insights into increasing employee longevity. A link exists between the hours of work, the level of overload, burnout and lack of control, work-life conflict, and other mental and physical health concerns (Lagerstrom, 2005). Results of this research study have the potential for adding insights and data into the field and provide information that help to address the health concerns of work related stress on obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Improving the work environment can promote wellness and contribute to the well-being of workers (Rosenthal, 2010).

High stress levels experienced by employees in the workplace have created a major concern and contributes to employees leaving the workplace. The Society for Human Resource Management (2016) reported that changes in the workplace have created significant stress levels on employees creating a threat to worker’s health. The estimated cost of replacement of one employee who makes minimum wage is $3,500. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) reported that in December of 2016 there were 2.9 million people who quit their jobs. To calculate the cost
of replacement for December alone would equal more than $10 billion to organizations. According to Gallup’s *State of the American Workplace* (2017), 51% of Americans are looking for their next job.

Corporate cultures are different based on the organization (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). Many rituals, values, and beliefs that have become stabilized over time are embedded in the culture of an organization (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). The intended outcome is to identify possible research that may provide insight into understanding why employees stay long-term in these environments. This knowledge may provide awareness into uncovering potential stressors and factors that may exist in an effort to improve the environments and culture of the organizations.

**Definition of Terms**

These terms represent commonly used language throughout the conduction of the study. Participants will be provided definitions to any terms requested. Terms may be used in conversation as well as in written form on the questionnaire.

**Engagement.** Engaged employees who have passion and a connection with the company and the work they do resulting in a desire to move the organization forward (Reilly, 2014).

**Disengagement.** These employees are not engaged and show no energy or passion for their work (Reilly, 2014).

**Actively disengaged.** Employees who are unhappy and indicate it in the workplace by undermining the work of others (Reilly, 2014).

**Turnover.** When employees leave an organization due to retirement, resignation, or removal or any other method and thereby discontinue employment resulting in the need for a replacement (Byerly, 2012).
**Stress.** A physiological response created by some external stimuli that can be psychological and physiological and exist both short term and long-term (Kleinman, 2012).

**Toxic workplace.** This describes workplace environments that are negative and encourage behaviors such as frequent derogatory comments to fellow employees, destructive gossip, and politics or the act of competing for power (Anderson, 2013). Employees in these environments tend to exhibit these toxic behaviors.

**Employee well-being.** Represents the combination of factors including: level of satisfaction with the work on a daily basis, love for what one is doing daily, quality of relationships, financial security, physical health, the contributions to community and how each of these interact (Rath & Harter, 2014).

**Culture.** Represents the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs employees have about their experiences in the workplace transmitted through social methods (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). Organizational culture refers to the stable characteristics rooted in the values developed internally over years to which employees are strongly committed (Robbins & Judge, 2011).

**Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

This study is designed to gather information from the perspective of the employee who worked in a perceived difficult environment. Investigated is why employees remain in perceived difficult environments, with the intent of providing information that will help with increased productivity in perceived difficult environments. The understanding of how these employees view the environment may provide insight that supports the Person-Environment Fit Theory or may reveal organizational information that aligns with personal connections and employee engagement.
There is also the assumption that participants will share honest and insightful information about their work experiences. Employees experience difficult periods they have overcome through resilience or some other method personal to them. Through understanding what methods are used to maintain longevity, this can help to provide data to the field to help others in like environments.

The limitations are that the information gathered is conducted through personal interviews both by phone and in person. The phone interviews will lack body language of personal interviews which may cause the interviewer to miss underlying messages. There is the possibility the retirees may not remember some aspects of the work environment. Lastly, consolidating information across the different work environments may make it difficult to examine data for the trends.

Delimitations of the study include the decision to accept retirees as participants of the study. Since the tenure increases from 4.5 to 10 years after workers reach the age of 65, obtaining workers who have long-term tenure will be accomplished by reaching out to retirees. Additionally, retirees are no longer in the workplace and this may provide an open format for which to communicate their work experience. The study does not solicit participants who are currently still employed in the environment for which they are interviewed. There is a concern that current employees in difficult environments may be less willing to participate due to fear of reprisal. Employees who have left employment with a greater than five-year tenure are eligible for the study.

The methodological approach used was chosen to allow for collection of data from at least 25 participants. Qualitative data collection of a Husserlian approach was selected because it will allow participants to communicate in their own words and from their own experiences
(Groenewald, 2004). The study will not use a quantitative survey style as it would prevent collection of actual participant experiences. Of the different types of phenomenology, transcendental was not selected as it suggests the suspension of the participant’s personal opinion in order to provide a single representation of a phenomenon (Kafle, 2011). Each participant will have individual experiences they will relate to the work environment which is in line with Husserlian phenomenology.

**Summary**

This study examines the perceptions of workers and why they remain beyond the average 4.5 years employed in perceived difficult job environments despite the circumstances, estimated dangers, or risks to health. The evolution of the workplace over the last 50 years has created demands resulting in work-related stress becoming a recognizable health threat to workers (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). This stress negatively impacts the health of employees in the workplace.

Physical ailments range from headaches and fatigue to serious complications such as cardiovascular and stroke. Toxic work environments contribute to the stress of employees (Anderson, 2013). The impact of workplace stress costs organizations an estimated $300 billion a year in absenteeism and healthcare (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). The negative impacts experienced as a result of a toxic environment cause a range of health problems for workers and 42% of employees have left their jobs due to work related stress (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016).

Employee turnover is costly to organizations. Of new employees, within 18 months of being hired, 49% experience job failure because of poor culture fit (Clifford, 2015). Poor hiring and poor treatment are considered reasons for high turnover in the workplace (Santovec, 2010).
Gallup’s State of the American Workplace (2017) shows that if employees stay longer in their current jobs they are more likely to have opportunities allowing them to do what they do best (performing in work that aligns with a worker’s personal desires and needs). There is a missed opportunity as workers leave before they can realize full potential. The Person-Environment Fit Theory states that the imbalance between demands and abilities is a reason for job stress (Schneider & Barbera, 2014).

The goal of the research is to provide information that can possibly help to improve the work environment. This study will provide insights into the perspectives of a group of 25 participants who work in difficult environments. In addition, the employee perspective and their perception of these difficult environments is researched. Improving employee well-being is potentially a positive byproduct of the research. A healthy workplace returns positive impacts such as greater employee health, less turnover, and employees who prefer to work in an environment despite salary (Randell, 2010).

Covered in this chapter was an introduction to the study, focus, and design for research on employees who work in difficult environments. Also explored were the impacts of difficult environments on employees and the negative health repercussions experienced. These negative effects are also experienced in organizations through turnover, lower productivity, and reduced profitability. Covered in the next chapter is the literature review describing the research on factors of organizational culture and employee wellness that help to build the framework of the study on increasing employee longevity.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to an American Time Use Study completed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2016, the average workday for employed Americans aged 25 to 54 is 8.8 hours. Considering a five-day workweek, add the average 7.8 hours of sleep as reported in the same study and that leaves 7.4 hours of time for other things. An average day for working Americans is eight hours and therefore, a substantial amount of a workers’ life is spent in the workplace (Crabtree, 2013).

The 2016 report from the Society for Human Resource Management indicated that 40% of workers believe they have stressful jobs and 75% encounter some form of physical symptom because of that stress. Workplace related stress costs about $300 billion per year due to absenteeism and healthcare (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). Stress is the cause of accidents at a rate of 60% – 80% and 42% of employees have changed jobs because of stress. As many as 48% of employees who experience stress lay awake at night (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). The lack of sleep has been implicated in health issues such as increased blood pressure and weight gain (Fryer, 2006).

The General Adaptation Syndrome by Hans Selye defined the impacts of stress on the body in three stages (Kleinman, 2012). The process begins with the alarm reaction in which the stressor is introduced, and the body first reacts. The body releases hormones to manage the stress and if the condition remains, this can become harmful. Excessive levels of cortisol can be damaging and cause ulcers or lead to stroke. Excessive levels of adrenaline can damage the brain or heart also leading to stroke or heart attack. The body counteracts this during the adaptation stage where it begins resistance and repair or renewal. When stressors are not abated, the initial alarm reaction maintains. After the adaptation stage, the person experiences the final stage of exhaustion. Once both physical and psychological energy to address the stressor are
completely expended, it is no longer possible to resist. The stress level will remain high and symptoms such as fatigue, burnout, and dysfunction may occur (Kleinman, 2012).

The average tenure for an employee with an organization is about 4.5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). One example of employees leaving the workplace is represented through turnover. Santovec (2010) attributes poor hiring and poor treatment to the high turnover in organizations. When the employee and the job are mismatched, everything suffers (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The experience of working in the wrong job can be compared to that of being married to the wrong person (Hallowell, 2011). Additionally, not having vision or the ability to connect, empathy, lack of motivation, and no future or fun are some other reasons people may leave employers (Efron, 2013). In late 2009, the number of employees who quit jobs was at 1.7 million per month and by March of 2014 the number had climbed to 2.4 million per month (Jackson, 2014). That number was at 2.9 million the month of December 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Employee turnover is a costly factor for organizations. There is an estimated cost of $3,500 to replace one worker who makes practically minimum wage and a cost as high as 400% times the salary for replacement of highly specialized employees (Santovec, 2010). Considering the minimum wage estimate for turnover replacement at $3,500, replacing 2.9 million would cost over $10 billion dollars for one month alone.

While statistics show that employees leave jobs after about 4.5 years, there are employees who stay in workplaces for much longer periods. This is listed in the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) report. In January of 2014, 53.1% of men and 56.9% of women over 65 years of age had stayed in their jobs longer than 10 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). The Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the older one gets, the longer the tenure despite gender or education. This research is designed to investigate the reasons some employees work beyond the average
tenure of 4.5 years. The purpose of the study is to examine the perceptions of workers concerning the reasons behind long-term employment in what the employee considers a difficult job environment despite the circumstances, estimated dangers, or risks to health.

The following databases were accessed for this literature review: ProQuest, Gallup, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Concordia Library, and Google Scholar. Searched for was the literature on organization culture, organization development, reframing organizations, and different perspectives on employees and their view of the workplace. Search terms included difficult work environments, toxic workplaces, employee longevity, workplace culture, employee health and well-being, difficult jobs, engagement, employee turnover, leadership, generational workers, system’s thinking, technology, free agents, bad bosses, worst companies to work, and quitting jobs.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that forms the basis for this research is partly based on the Person-Environment Fit Theory (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). This theory which dates as far back as 1909, suggests that the employee is affected by both the characteristics of the environment as well as personal individual behavior (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). To create optimal alignment of employee-position, the employee’s career orientation and career environment must align (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). The Person-Environment Fit model is multi-level and includes relationships between the employee and the position, the employee and the workgroup, the employee and the manager, as well as the employee and the organization (Su, Murdock, & Rounds, 2015). Factors affecting fit include the compatibility of the employee and their skill level in the position. Of importance is the alignment of an employee’s personal values along with the values and customs of the organization. A conceptualization of Person-
Environment Fit is that it consists of the values of both the person and the organization (Schneider & Barbera, 2014).

Corporate cultures vary throughout the many different organizations. As cultures develop in institutions, they become stable over time (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). The beliefs and values of an organization develop over time to form the cultural patterns within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The study of organizational cultures continues to be a challenge and different epistemologies (theory or nature of knowledge) exist (Schneider & Barbera, 2014).

Employee well-being is another concept that forms the basis for this study. Rath and Harter (2014) list career, social, financial, physical, and community, as important aspects of employee well-being. Employees who are not able to perform in activities they enjoy have a diminished well-being (Rath & Harter, 2014). Health issues can be related to difficult environments based on levels of engagement as shown when employee stress levels decrease as the work day ends. Cholesterol and triglyceride levels of engaged employees greatly decreased when experiencing positive environments which shows the brain and bloodstream are impacted by work experiences (Rath & Harter, 2014).

Engaged employees represent a small percentage globally of only 13% (Rigoni & Nelson 2016). These employees are present, enthusiastic about their work, participating in all aspects necessary, and engaged in the mission of the company. Gallup statistics report that as many as 87% of employees are disengaged. This means 63% are not engaged and 24% are actively disengaged (Crabtree, 2013). Disengagement impacts work locations negatively as employees show up for work and give no more than their bare minimum (Bolman & Deal, 2013).
The top reason for employee satisfaction in the workplace was employer appreciation of the work done by employees (Morgan, 2014). An employee who is ignored by his boss is 40% more likely to be actively disengaged. If a manager is at least providing feedback on weaknesses, the likelihood of being disengaged is only 22% and for managers who focus on strengths the number drops to 1% (Rath & Harter, 2014). Listed as number two is having a good relationship with co-workers. Job security and salary were number seven and eight respectively on the list (Morgan, 2014). Recognition and positive relationships with co-workers rather than with an employee’s own supervisors or managers were other factors noted in surveys (Knight, 2014; Morgan, 2014). A 2013 engagement survey conducted by TINYpulse.com revealed that peer-to-peer recognition influenced employee engagement more than recognition from the supervisor and that employee happiness is 23.3% more impactful with co-workers than supervisors which supports having relationships with coworkers in the workplace.

Workers are more satisfied when friendships are established in the workplace (Riordan, 2013). Having a friend is a fundamental human need (Hannon, 2006). There are many sets of data that support having a best-friend at work and further contributes to high levels of engagement (Rath & Harter, 2010). Employees feel both optimistic and secure when they feel connected at work (Hallowell, 2011).

Having a single direct connection with a positive person provides a 15% greater opportunity for satisfaction in the workplace (Rath & Harter, 2010). Connection builds relationships and provides a sense of belonging for employees. Those who have a best-friend at work are seven times as likely to be more engaged, have better work ethics and attend to customers effectively (Rath & Harter, 2014). This promotes work ethics in work groups and teams (Rath & Harter, 2010). It is the connection between people that creates energy and
improvement in relationships and brings meaningful change (Hannon, 2006). Relationships are a better predictor of satisfaction than money (Rather & Harter, 2014).

Even in challenging environments, having a best-friend at work has been proven to improve the engagement levels of workers (Rath & Clifton, 2015). Being in a best-friend relationship increases focus and passion, as well as loyalty and productivity in the workplace (Friedman, 2014). Relationships built on mutual trust can enhance productivity (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016; Lencioni, 2002). The data is clear that best-friend relationships tie people together and increase the ability for them to look out for one another (Rath & Clifton, 2015).

As one of five strategies in developing a more complete life, Rath and Clifton (2015) suggest one make a best-friend. Responses to terms such a good friend, close friend, or simply “friend” all returned lower levels of engagement (Rath & Clifton, 2015). Recommendations were made to have several best-friends. Tom Rath, head of Gallup Organization’s workplace research practice, stated that our focus when improving self is focused inward though it is the connections between people that create the real energy and provide meaningful returns (Hannon, 2006). There is a 50% increase in employee satisfaction when employees have a close friend at work (Hannon, 2006).

This study is designed to investigate reasons employees continue to work in difficult environments beyond the average tenure of 4.5 years. The approach used investigates those with employee longevity five years or longer within the same organization. Focus will be on organizations considered difficult or stressful for employees to work. A 2016 Workplace and Health study conducted through the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio identified perceived difficult environments in which to work. These include
construction or outdoor work, factory or manufacturing, and restaurants (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio, 2016). The intent is that insight will be gained through a minimum of 25 interviews with retirees and employees who have remained in these environments for five years or longer to gain insight into reasons they stayed.

**Factors of Age and Diversity Affecting Longevity**

Workplaces are now more diverse than ever before with five generations co-existing in the workplace (Knight, 2014; SAP News, 2014). Traditionalists were born through 1945 and feel an obligation to work. Baby Boomers were born from 1946 to 1965, are loyal and understand that work is expected. Generation X were born from 1966 to 1977, and are more concerned with a work-life balance. Millennials were born from 1978 to 1995, and seek freedom and flexibility in the workplace. Generation Z were born after 1997 and seek stability along with structure (Malburg, 2016). There are multiple age groups and employee needs may be different with each group (Knight, 2014).

The Millennial group comprises those born roughly between 1978 and 1995. Millennials are considered the anxious generation and experience pressure to become successful before the age of 30 (Schroeder, 2017). Anxiety is a result of stress. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (2016), all people experience stress in their lifetime and while stress is the response to some act or threat, the reaction to stress is anxiety. Of working married Millennials, 83% have a working spouse (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio, 2016).

The age range for Millennials in the workplace is from 22 to 39. Millennials are the group who are more willing to leave employment for other opportunities (Meister, 2012; Malburg, 2016; Khadder, 2009). Forbes reported that as many as 91% of Millennials are
expected to leave their jobs within three years (Meister, 2012). Human resource professionals are concerned with the number of one to two year tenures seen with Millennial resumes which they equate to wasted time with training and development (Meister, 2012).

Those identified as Generation X are the group focused on achieving work-life balance. They see work as a difficult challenge but aspire towards independence. Their reason for changing jobs is primarily for more money (Malburg, 2016). The age range is from 40 to 51 years of age. Generation X is the smallest of the generational groups (Ruch, 2000). This group was considered the first to have both parents working and grew up in the latchkey era (children who came home from school to no one in the home) (Malburg, 2016). There is a tendency towards becoming free agents which affects turnover or retention in organizations (Pink, 2001; Ruch, 2000). Members of Generation X are loyal to their skills and seek to employ them (Ruch, 2000).

Retention costs associated with training and developing Generation X employees, born roughly from 1965 and 1980, make retention an important consideration for organizations (Ruch, 2000). When an organization loses an employee, the costs accumulated include separation, vacancy, replacement, training, and performance differential (Byerly, 2012). This same report listed the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ 2012 numbers for separations at 37% with a variance in industry from 10% in state government to 39% in the entertainment industry (Byerly, 2012).

Baby Boomers range in age from 52 to 71 and Traditionalists are 72 years or older. These two generational groups are very loyal to the organization and understand that work is expected (Malburg, 2016). Traditionalists worked in the organization often in one job for life and Baby Boomers were simply loyal to the organization (Malburg, 2016). The economic downturn of 2008 affected these generational groups and resulted in many delaying retirement.
for monetary reasons (Malburg, 2016). There are many still in the workplace (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). The age of 65 is when the average tenure for employees in the workplace increases from the 4.5 to 10 years or longer.

However, retention can also have negative effects for the employee. An employee staying too long with any one employer can reflect negatively on the individual when seeking another job and possibly suggest that this longevity is the result of laziness or unwillingness to change (Scarantino, 2013). Another report shows that job-hopping can be considered dangerous to a healthy career because employers may not be interested in hiring one who jumps from one job to another (Khadder, 2009). This report stated that people under 30 may change jobs as often as every 1.5 years.

Cultural diversity will continue to increase in the workplace (Toossi, 2002). The United States population has become more diverse both racially and ethnically in the last 50 years (Toossi, 2002). Americans between the ages of 21-30 are willing to consider expatriate opportunities (Strack, von der Linden, Booker, & Strohmayer, 2014). The size of the workforce in 1950 was 62 million and is expected to grow to 192 million by the year 2050 (Toossi, 2002). Many workers are willing to work abroad. The lure is not just for career development, but for increasing life experience (Strack et al., 2014).

**Healthy Workplaces**

Research has shown that when employees experience meaningful work, a measure of control through self-direction, a supportive manager who provides learning opportunities, positive social climate, and respect and inclusiveness, this provides the means for a healthy workplace (Lagerstrom, 2005). Regarding the dynamics of a psychologically healthy workplace, the physical environment, promotion of health programs aimed to assist employees in healthy
decision making, and the psychosocial environment are components which impact employee behaviors and ultimately the outcome of a healthy work environment (Randell, 2010). Other factors listed were psychological, physical, behavioral, and organizational. A healthy workplace must have regard for the skills and attitudes as well as the energy and commitment of employees, recognizing these as valuable resources that help to achieve the goals of the organization (McHugh, 2001). Understanding that meaningful work is an essential characteristic in the lives of some employees must be recognized (McHugh, 2001).

An inclusive environment may be the commonality between the dynamics of the organization and health in the workplace; and leadership has a strong influence (Lagerstrom, 2005). Randell (2010) suggests that although much is known regarding combatting disease and illness, little is known regarding the fostering of well-being and function in the workplace. Casella (2014) used a thematic approach to research 10 corporate websites and described the best places to work. These were explored in two groups – those in receipt of the American Psychological Association Healthy Workplace Award and Glassdoor Best places to work. Findings showed that the award winners understood what human values provide to the workplace. A healthy workplace at full potential values its members (McHugh, 2001). In order to evolve, organizations must recognize that employees want greater fulfillment and that they have much to offer (Casella, 2014). Research has shown that a positive exchange is experienced between employee and organization when values such as friendship, collaboration, openness and trust, and personal freedom are displayed (Schneider & Barbera, 2014).

Overall, employees look for benefits from their employer that will help them to take care of themselves and their families such as insurance, retirement plans, and flexibility (State of the American Workforce, 2017). The benefits of a healthy workplace for the organization are gained
through employee health, reduced organizational turnover and higher levels of employee retention, and greater opportunities for recruitment with workers willing to trade off salaries for a preferred working environment (Randell, 2010). Engaged workers have passion and are willing to go the extra mile for their company (Reilly, 2014).

**Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement refers to employees who have passion for and experience a connection with the company and the work they do (Reilly, 2014). According to Gallup’s State of the American Workplace (2017), while engaged employees contribute to the growth of the company, disengaged and actively disengaged employees do just the opposite and cost the organization between $483 and $685 billion per year in lost productivity. Actively disengaged employees may even be out to damage the company (Reilly, 2014). Engaged employees stand apart and go the extra mile providing discretionary effort necessary to innovatively move the company forward (Reilly, 2014). Engaged employees are more likely not to leave the organization which reduces the costs associated with turnover (Statement of the American Workplace, 2017). The report also stated that even though 37% of engaged employees may be checking for better opportunities, 56% of not-engaged and 73% actively disengaged employees are looking to leave.

With engagement comes higher levels of productivity, safety, and profitability (Sorenson, 2013). Gallup reports that engaged employees are better workers, miss less days, and are devoted to what they do (Rath & Harter, 2010). Levels of engagement also have a great impact on employee well-being (Robison, 2012). To the contrary, companies spend between $450 and $550 billion dollars per year due to low levels of engagement (Clifford, 2015). It is interesting to note that in 1994, Heaney, Israel, and House’s comments on the effects of job satisfaction and
health for automobile workers. The researchers reported the loss of productivity and cost to healthcare in America at that time was at $50 billion annually. In comparing Heaney, Israel, and House’s (1994) cost of job satisfaction to healthcare of $50 billion with Society for Human Resource Management’s (2015) reference to the effect of job satisfaction at $300 billion for healthcare, the difference is an increase of $250 billion dollars in 23 years or $10.86 billion per year.

Surveys reveal that employee engagement in the workplace is at an all-time low (Riordan, 2013; Morgan, 2014). Hallowell (2011) referred to connection as “The Most Powerful Step” in his *Cycle of Excellence* (p. 75). Through the act of connection, all involved are embarking on a larger platform, one where they bring out the best in each other (Hallowell, 2011). Society for Human Resource Management published *Revitalizing a Changing Workforce* in December of 2015. In this research report, Society for Human Resource Management looked at 37 aspects of employee engagement. Over 77% of employees rated the relationship established with co-workers as the top item for employee satisfaction. This element tied with opportunities to use skills/abilities. Relationship with immediate supervisor received 74% and career advancement opportunities received 57%. Society for Human Resource Management used a top two box scoring method that included somewhat satisfied and very satisfied to create the rankings.

One study examined stress in the workplace and showed that women were more positive at work while men were more positive at home (Damaske, Smyth, & Zawadzki, 2014). The authors suggested that the level of job satisfaction plays a role in how the employee responds to stress in the workplace. According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, human needs are physiological, safety, belongingness, and self-esteem respectively. Humans may be at varying
levels of the hierarchy continuum. To motivate, it is necessary to know where a person is within the hierarchy (Robbins & Judge, 2011). Self-awareness helps the growth process in relationships by helping one to better understand what they need from others and improve on their own personal deficiencies (Tjan, 2015).

Le et al. (2011) studied the relationship between individual personality traits and job performance. The study included conscientiousness and emotional stability. Job stressors can trigger behaviors that are enacted against the organization because of negative emotions (Le, et al., 2011). The study further stated that emotional stability possessed in adequate levels could minimize concerns. In a study on whether work is a safe haven from home, results show that participants felt greater stress when combining work/family balance than on non-work days (Damaske et al., 2014). This was determined to show that the stress of determining balance with home and work could be the reason.

**Toxic Environments**

In 2016, Career Cast rated 200 jobs and reported their determination of the best and the worst. The research was based on environment, income, employment growth, income growth potential, unemployment, and stress (The Worst Jobs of 2016). Among those at the bottom of the list were retail sales, pest control workers, enlisted military personnel, and disc jockeys. Regardless of employee level, all experienced negative impacts which made them dissatisfied (McIntyre, 2013). Recurring themes among these perceived worst companies were low pay, difficulty with micromanagement, condescending behaviors, and unrealistic demands. The companies did not connect a clear vision with their employees. Workers complained of long hours and low pay. Employee treatment was negative. Pink (2001) wrote that in current economies, organizations quickly cease to exist after becoming ineffective or toxic. Stated in
Gallup’s State of the American Workforce (2017), organizations will either adapt to the current needs of the workforce or find themselves unable to attract and hold onto talent, which could lead to a loss in customers.

Toxic environments often are filled with negativity such as tearing down of others, destructive gossip, and politics (Anderson, 2013). Daily exposure to this type of environment can affect one’s self-worth. The alienating or dehumanizing effects through stress and strain in the workplace environment contribute to harmful impacts in both the physiological and psychological health of the employee (McHugh, 2012). One survey of 4,500 hospital personnel in several different positions revealed that 71% believed disruptive, abusive, and condescending behavior was the result of medical errors and 27% believed these errors led to the death of patients (Porath, 2015).

Work related stress can also impact health (Anderson, 2013; Rath & Harter, 2010; Rosenthal, 2011; Society for Human Resource Management, 2016; Swanson 2015). There are 43% of working adults who consider their workplace to have a negative impact on stress. Further negative impacts of the stressful job were on eating habits, sleeping habits, and weight (Neel, 2016). Other health issues contributed to by stress include cardiovascular, obesity, and the common cold (Swanson, 2015; Rosenthal, 2011). Some of the leading causes of stress are workload - 46%, problems with coworkers - 28%, work/life balance - 20%, and lack of job security - 6% (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). Some of the symptoms exhibited include fatigue - 51%, headaches - 44%, upset stomach - 34%, and muscle tension - 30%. Additional psychological symptoms include anger, nervousness, and lack of energy (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). Research shows that the simple act of being rude to a person can cause them to experience an elevation in glucocorticoids leading to
disparate health issues (Swanson, 2015). An imbalance of career and relationships can result in unhappiness or becoming unhealthy (Rosenthal, 2011). Many working adults believe their job has an impact on their health to include how they live and exist both inside and outside of work (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio, 2016). This loss in employee productivity costs organizations $150 billion annually (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016).

The lack of trust is another negative as it impacts the whole organization (Covey, 2008). Lencioni (2002) placed the absence of trust at the foundation of a dysfunctional team which leads to invulnerability. When a team is vulnerable, they are willing to exhibit weaknesses which allows for growth (Lencioni, 2002). Leaders may use force in an effort to obtain compliance from employees, however, this causes employees to respond with disrespect and employees become distant (Porath, 2016). Trust among team members and leaders fosters strength in bonds, the ability to take risks, and no fear of exposing vulnerabilities (Robbins & Judge, 2011; Lencioni, 2002).

In a toxic environment, the employees who are most negative have the ability to spread that set of beliefs to other employees (Porath, 2016). Even the best employees who are subjected to this negative environment are 13 times more likely to decide to leave the organization (Porath, 2016). The average tenure for workers is 4.5 years in the workplace. However, there are some with greater tenures of 10 or more years as noted in the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2016). Trust and empathy are foundational for healthy relationships and the social group shapes perception (Rock, 2009).
Corporate Culture

The culture of an organization is embedded with rituals, values, and beliefs that have stabilized over time (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). A total of 92% of employees consider the overall corporate culture as important or very important (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). Job satisfaction in these environments was linked highly to respectful treatment of employees despite level, compensation, benefits, job security, opportunities to use skills, and trust (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). Some of the things employees complain about are embedded in the culture and unchangeable (Gallos, 2006). Palmer (2004) stated that when faced with combative situations, people will withdraw into places of private beliefs to prevent the conflict from personally affecting them.

Industries considered most stressful and dangerous for workers include retail outlets, construction or outdoor work, factory or manufacturing, medical, store, warehouse, restaurant, office, and schools (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio, 2016). A stressful and dangerous job was noted to have negative effects on stress, eating habits, sleep, and weight (Neel, 2016). In a poll of 1,601 participants, 24% of respondents believed they experienced chronic illness because of their employment. Another 19% stated they had either experienced or were aware of violence that had occurred in the workplace (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio, 2016). According to the same research, 65% of factory or manufacturing employees stated they still go to work if they are sick and 60% of medical personal stated they go to work when they are sick (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio, 2016). While these are positive numbers, they reflect a negative behavior in a medical industry where potential exists for impact to patients. The cost of
presenteeism, coming to work while ill, is about $150 billion annually in lost productivity (Chen, 2010).

An integral part of the corporate culture is leadership. An ineffective leader can negatively affect your health of employees (Swanson, 2015). The risk of stroke is increased by 33% with an ineffective manager (Rath & Clifton, 2015). An employee who is ignored by his boss is 40% more likely to be actively disengaged. If the manager is at least providing feedback on weaknesses, the likelihood of being disengaged is only 22% and for managers who focus on strengths the number drops to 1% (Rath & Harter, 2014). Up to 30% of employees have reported working with an ineffective manager. Ineffective leaders may exhibit disrespect and violate psychological contracts (Swanson, 2015). Good leaders create corporate culture by developing and not forcing (Anderson, 2013).

Steve Jobs is considered as one of America’s great innovators (Isaacson, 2012). However, as a leader, many of his early employees chose never to work for him again (Eadicicco, 2014). Jobs pushed his employees to produce, openly confronted, and ridiculed some to the point of being condescending (Eadicicco, 2014). When questioned about his tough demeanor with employees, Jobs replied that he worked with smart people who could get other jobs but do not and that results are what should be noted (Isaacson, 2012). This did not make him a less brilliant innovator but it did make his employees hesitant to want to work for him. Neither the success of Apple nor Jobs’ innovative genius are disputed. Employees who worked for Jobs may have found his methods infuriating but believed it led to produce the impossible (Isaacson, 2012).

Leaders deliver experiences that drive emotional responses in groups (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008). Mirror neurons are brain functions that cause one to mimic what another does.
(Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008). This plays out both positively and negatively in the workplace. The mood of a room can spread and widely affect all involved (Bradberry & Greaves, 2012). Behavior is motivated by mood and cognitive processing (Martin, Ward, Achee, & Wyer, 1993). Both positive and negative moods are amplified in different ways causing different responses.

According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, when physiological, safety, belongingness, and esteem (in that order) are unmet, people will experience the motivation necessary to achieve the next level (McLeod, 2007). Employee needs within the organization are important but may not be acknowledged as life fluctuations cause needs not to be met (McLeod, 2007). The fulfillment of human needs allow adaptation to the environment and the organizational leaders influence the internal environment affecting the belief that needs are being met (Schneider & Barbera, 2014).

**Free Agents**

The idea of free agents is best described by first understanding the organization man and that they have changed (Pink, 2001; Knight, 2014). The history of work practices in America through the last century describe this as the man who obtains a position in one of the large corporate organizations and becomes a part of the fabric of that institution, weaving his own self into the corporation’s identity and goals (Pink, 2001). Numbers collected through the Bureau of Labor Statistics do not accurately represent the numbers of free agents working in America (Pink, 2001). Considering the labels, soloists, temps, and microbusinesses, free agents at a modest number were estimated to be about 33 million or one of four workers (Pink, 2001; SAP News, 2016). With employee longevity at 4.5 years, this concept is included as a possible direction of the future workforce. Company longevity is shrinking while employee longevity is increasing (Pink, 2001).
Free agents are those who have decided the organization job is not for them and have endeavored to create their own future. The term is vague because it is difficult to describe this group of people (Pink, 2001). Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) reports that 38% of business and financial workers and 35% of professional workers work from home. This is another shift in the work environment, one made possible by changes in technology. Technology has allowed more jobs to be performed easier with more productivity and resulted in the reduction of a need for a person to perform the tasks (Rotman, 2013). Due to changes in technologies, industries and how people live, there are population shifts that affect human capital (Florida, 2010). The list of job losses continues in different areas as technology evolves (Rotman, 2013). Retention of workers is a wise strategy for companies that lack the ability to hold on to necessary talent but workers generally outlive organizations. Workers then have to move from one job to another (Pink, 2001). The ability to thrive in locations is dependent upon attracting and retaining talent no matter how skilled the job (Florida, 2010).

Where corporate cultures are strong, values can be drivers of achievement (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). People seek and create environments that help them to manifest their personal traits that align them with the environment (Su, Murdock, & Rounds, 2015). More than half of employees stated recognition from their boss was important (Society for Human Resource Management, 2015). The frustration with ineffective leaders and dysfunction in workplaces have caused employees to leave (Pink, 2001). Freedom is experienced through a free agent by finding essential meaning in the work they do (Pink, 2001). Consider the earlier statement that the fulfillment of human needs allow adaptation to the environment and the organizational leaders influence the internal environment affecting the belief that needs are being met
(Schneider & Barbera, 2014). Working outside of organizations, free agents experience the authenticity of being themselves (Pink, 2001).

Pink (2001) compared the idea of free agents today to that of the year 1790 during a time when people were farmers and small merchants, and worked independently. Few people held the idea of what we call a job today. The growth of technology contributes to the change. With the invention of robots and automation, technology growth is credited with causing the sluggish growth in employment over the last 10 or so years. Additional claims are that the rapid growth is destroying jobs at a rate that exceeds the need for them. These employment trends have greatly affected the middle class (Rotman, 2013). Considering these technological effects on organizations, the shift to free agents, and the change in organizational direction, insight into increasing employee longevity for those who remain in the corporate realm may be beneficial to the field of study.

**Systems Thinking**

Technological advancement has increased the need for Systems Thinking (Arnold & Wade, 2015). Systems Thinking involves a unified group of activities or behaviors that act as a whole and create an event or outcome (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Hodgson & Midgley, 2014). When thinking of the system, it is the whole of all of its parts and everything within it becomes a driver of the end result (Arnold & Wade, 2015). The individual parts may have differing goals or objectives, but they combine to drive the system as a whole. Barry Richmond is credited as the originator of Systems Thinking and defines it as developing an understanding of the structure that drives behavior through interconnections (Arnold & Wade, 2015).

Systems thinking relates to the ability to understand complex behavior, discover and provide feedback on the behavior, identify the flow of relationships, recognize impact of delays,
and identify nonlinearities and challenges. The system consists of purpose, elements, and interconnections (Arnold & Wade, 2015). To clarify what is within the boundaries of the system, mapping should be done (Hodgson & Midgley, 2014). Mapping helps to outline assumptions and identify what is either in or out of the current system. With this study, those who work in difficult environments are within a system. Businesses must learn to adapt in a complex environment (Hodgson & Midgley, 2014). Through the understanding of systems thinking and complex behaviors, the goal is to learn to predict and eventually adjust outcomes (Arnold & Wade, 2015). When assessing through systems thinking, the process is comprised of seeking optimization, unmet need, and new visions and patterns of viability (Hodgson & Midgley, 2014).

Within the organizational structure are environmental factors that affect the employees and the culture of the organization. There may be a curvilinear relationship that aligns employee’s personalities with their job performance (Le, et. al, 2011). The level of job performance is closely related to the employee’s personality and work behavior (Le, et. al, 2011). Employee needs and traits become the values which influence beliefs, assumptions, and expectations (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). Though related, there is a distinct difference between the employee and the environment, yet they cannot be separated (Schneider & Barbera, 2014).

According to Kramer (2016), CEO of WorkJam, from November of 2014 to the same time in 2015 there was an hourly wage increase of 3% for retail workers. There was a growth of 284,000 jobs during that same time period. Kramer (2016) summarized that the increase in pay provided employees with options which allowed them to make better decisions regarding the decision to stay in their current environments. Problems noted in the retail environment were lack of communication, flexibility, and poor feedback defined as information from management.
to employees but none from employees to management. The increase in average pay empowered retail workers to expect support from management and flexibility or the ability to choose work elsewhere (Kramer, 2016). The system which consisted of the driving factors (pay, increase in jobs, employee needs) within the environment drove any decisions made internally based on that environment.

**Review of Methodological Literature**

Organizational Behavior studies reveal how people act and why, and ways to predict this behavior (Robbins & Judge, 2011). The culture is a distinct way to explain the work experience (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). A reciprocal relationship exists between the employees and the organizations in which they work (Bolman & Deal, 2013). When the relationship between people and the organization are not aligned, there are negative consequences (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

The Person-Organization Fit Theory suggests that people and organizations lure one another through a match in values. Further matching of those values with culture is a predictor of job satisfaction, commitment, and low turnover (Robbins & Judge, 2011). The impact of the culture on employees is part of the Person-Environment Fit Theory. Questioned is the idea that high stressors are created that lead to employee concerns (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). Person-Environment Fit is a multi-level construct where the employee fits with either the skills of the position, the relationship with the co-workers, team or manager, or the organization as a whole. An employee’s skills may fit well with the position they perform, fit may be aligned with the development of relationships with other employees, or a individual fit with working in a particular organization. These levels need to be evaluated differently based on the individual (Su, Murdock, and Rounds, 2015).
People provide the energy and talent necessary for organizations and in turn receive meaningful work and satisfaction. When the fit is not in alignment, both the employee and the organization may suffer (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Both Robbins and Judge (2011) and Schneider and Barbera (2014) address the theory, however, both focus on working in difficult environments and information provided is limited to the cultural difficulty of the employee experience.

Additional articles reviewed for this research covered the concerns of health and wellness from the perspective of physical health and that of well-being. Society for Human Resource Management (2015) reported that 40% of employees experience extreme levels of stress and 26% are often burned out. The Society for Human Resource Management (2015) study was conducted on both satisfaction and engagement and examined organizational demographics with as few as 100 employees to as many as 25,000 or more. The total overall response or participation was about 600 participants. Generations were considered from Baby Boomers to Millennials. Job tenures were two years or more broken into five categories. This 2015 Society for Human Resource Management study identified different job and educational levels as well as race.

The Workplace and Health study conducted through the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio (2016) was done on a probability sample of 1,601 workers and covered those in low-paying jobs, dangerous jobs, confessed or reported workaholics, Millennials, shift workers, those with disabilities, gender and race differences and different levels of physical health. Participants were contacted by phone and were identified as adults working for more than 20 hours per week for someone else. The results identified that 40% of working adults felt they were potentially in dangerous situations at work and that 25% of those workplaces did nothing to improve the conditions (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public
Health for National Public Radio, 2016). For those in dangerous jobs, 60% of respondents rated their workplaces as fair to poor for stress reduction.

Schneider and Barbera (2014) suggested that there are various contexts with which to understand culture and that research into organizational culture remains underdeveloped. Despite more than 4,600 articles written since 1980, they offer competing definitions that return many different aspects of culture, but several different approaches (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). The research suggests that culture is affected by organizational rituals, values, and beliefs (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). This helps to align the personality traits which tend to tell one about how human behaviors co-occur (Nettle, 2007).

Phenomenology is the data collection strategy for this research. This method is used to capture common experiences through interviews with participants. Interviews are considered the most appropriate method of data collection for Phenomenological research (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Through Phenomenological research, participants will provide the actual experience of the environments in which they worked (Waters, 2016). Phenomenological research provides a method to collect and understand perceptions and perspectives regarding a situation (van Manen, 1990). Purposive sampling will be used to select individuals based on the environments identified as perceived difficult. The population will consist of retirees or workers who have remained at least 5 years in the perceived difficult environments identified through the research.

**Synthesis of Research Findings**

Employees who are experiencing very stressful experiences in the workplace are more likely to develop physical and psychological health concerns. Additionally, employees are leaving the workplace due to these concerns. As a result, organizations experience high costs related to lost profitability, low productivity, and high levels of turnover. Some organizations
believe as much as 10% turnover is good and helps to provide the framework necessary for studying longevity (Smith & Rutigliano, 2002). Retaining high performers in challenging environments can be difficult and strategies are required to engage workers or promote worker job satisfaction. Retention data may not be sufficient without also understanding turnover (Byerly, 2012). Not all turnover is bad and it can represent a healthy organization where accountability measures are in place (Byerly, 2012). When there is low turnover in positions where employees are not efficient, the organization itself may be unhealthy.

The concerns related to generational impacts were discussed. As there are as many as five generations in some organizations, employees look to align their values with those of the company’s brand and mission (Meister, 2012). Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) statistics show there is a lower number of Millennial and Generation X employees remaining in the workplace compared to the older Baby Boomers. Generation X are considered less interested in academics and training and more interested in computers and games (Ruch, 2000). In 2014, SAP News reported that there are five generations in multiple geographic areas with varying skills and experiences which represents the most diverse work environment experienced by businesses (SAP News, 2014). The same report stated that companies are experiencing a talent gap and that workers feel their companies do not embrace the latest technology nor provide necessary training.

Engaged employees help organizations thrive and create healthy environments (Rath & Harter, 2010). Relationship building in the workplace can be of great value. Relationships in the workplace are a higher predictor of business successes (Rath & Harter, 2010). The idea of satisfaction in the workplace goes hand in hand with peak performance (Hallowell, 2011). Employees have difficulty becoming part of the team dynamics when they feel unfulfilled during
the early timeframe of the appointment, which leads to a failure to invest in the work (Santovec, 2010). The most memorable events employees experience include the presence of another person and the impact of connections and relationships cannot be underestimated. Having a best-friend in the workplace can impact the decision made to stay or leave an organization. Best-friends in the workplace create a pleasant environment for one another and are more satisfied when they have friendships in the work environment (Riordan, 2013). Having a best-friend at work has been seen to enrich work relationships and improve organizational culture (Rath & Harter, 2010).

**Critique of Previous Research**

Schneider and Barbera (2014) noted that there continues to be no single definition or designated methodology for studying Organizational Culture. The Person-Environment Fit Theory looks at both the environment and the individual (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). The difficulty in alignment is amplified by the needs of both the individual and the organization. This study looks at employees who have remained in organizations for many years despite difficulties with aligning to fit into the structures, cultures, and social dynamics of the organizations.

There are contradictions in the literature regarding turnover. Some organizations believe turnover is good and an indication of a healthy and accountable organization (Byerly, 2012). Other organizations focus on the high cost of turnover and seek to decrease it (Randell, 2010). Multiple reports related the impacts of turnover and retention focus mainly on the costs to the organization and how important it is to bring greater insight into retention in order to prevent these extreme costs (Byerly, 2012). Still other reports address the issues of the number of generations coexisting in the current workplace (Meister, 2012). One possible reason for
longevity might include the connections made in the workplace (Rath and Harter, 2010). Well-being is considered to be a greater predictor of job satisfaction, even more than income (Rath & Harter, 2010).

Employee wellness means healthier employees both in the workplace and at home (Hallowell, 2010). Because employees spend most of their waking hours in the workplace, the act of improving wellness may help to solve health concerns (Rosenthal, 2011). Organizations are also losing money at the rate of $350 billion dollars a year due to a lack of employee engagement on and with their jobs. The Society for Human Resource Management (2015) defines employee engagement as the conditions experienced in the workplace coupled with the employee’s perceptions and behaviors related to the work. Improving employee engagement increases operational metrics such as profitability, productivity, safety, attendance, and revenue (Rath & Harter, 2014). The benefits of having a best-friend at work have been shown to drive these same metrics and build work groups suggesting that the camaraderie created between and among workers provides positive energy to enhance competitive advantage for the organization (Riordan, 2013).

Summary

SAP News (2014) reported that leaders today are challenged with leading in a workplace that houses multiple generations, races, backgrounds, religious beliefs, and overall diverse representations. In a workforce retention survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (2012), 60% of employees stated they remain with their current employer because of benefits, 59% remain because of pay, and 67% stated they stay because they enjoy what they do.

In the 2016 Work and Well Being Survey conducted by the American Psychological Association, over 1,500 people from 2011 to 2016 were polled. Questions ranged from
workplace satisfaction, to motivation, to support from an employee’s direct manager. Regardless of the question, the fluctuation of responses did not deviate more than about seven percentage points from one year to the next with no real explanation for improvements or decreases from year to year (American Psychological Association, 2016). The study ultimately showed that not much changed in the five years of research. Even questions related to workplace stress and low wages showed no significant change over the period researched. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of workers concerning the reasons behind long-term employment in difficult job environments despite the circumstances, estimated dangers, or risks to health.

Covered in this chapter was a look at the aspects of employee longevity in the workplace. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) reported the average tenure is 4.5 years. Some of the perceived most difficult environments in which to work include construction or outdoor work, factory or manufacturing, and restaurants (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio, 2016). As many as 40% of workers believe they have stressful jobs and 75% encounter some physical symptoms because of that stress and the cost is as much as $300 billion per year due to absenteeism and healthcare. Stress is the cause of accidents at a rate of 60% – 80% and 42% of employees have changed jobs because of stress (Society for Human Resource Management, 2015).

Even though these high levels of stress exist, there are employees who stay in workplaces for much longer than the average 4.5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). A review of the literature covers factors of generations in the workplace, effect of toxic environments, the concept of corporate culture and the effect on employees, the idea of free agents and the change in employee vision of the workplace, and Systems Thinking. Covered in the next chapter is a
synopsis of the methodology used for the study. The layout of the research design will be
explained as well as the targeted population for the sampling and collection of data for the study.
Chapter 3: The Methodology

Employees subjected to difficult environments are 13 times more likely to leave their employer (Porath, 2016). Difficult work environments identified by a 2016 Workplace and Health study include Outdoor Work, Manufacturing, and Restaurants (Harvard T.H. Chan study for National Public Radio, 2016). Workplace stress, as related to difficult environments, has resulted in 42% of employees changing jobs (Society for Human Resource Management, 2015). The resulting effects are seen in employee tenure numbers which currently average only 4.5 years. Turnover is very costly for organizations and the impact of job loss can be estimated in the billions of dollars (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Santovec, 2010).

Workplace stress is also the cause of accidents at a rate of 60% to 80% (Society for Human Resource Management, 2015). Since employees spend most of their waking hours in the workplace, reducing the level of stress also improves health and reduces the effects stress has on overall health (Rosenthal, 2011). This environment can impact an employee’s self-worth where stress and strain contribute negatively in the physiological and psychological health of the employee (McHugh, 2012, Rath & Harter, 2010).

Other factors affecting worker tenure include frustration because of inadequate leadership and dysfunction in the workplace (Pink, 2001). Employees who are not able to perform in activities they enjoy have a diminished well-being (Rath & Harter, 2014). Difficult or toxic work environments are filled with negativity and is the biggest danger to staying long-term in any toxic environment (Anderson, 2013).

According to Crabtree (2013), levels of disengaged employees in the workplace are at 87% worldwide. Nationally the levels of disengaged are 67%, a number that has barely budged in more than ten years (Rigoni & Nelson, 2016). Companies spend between $450 and $550
billion dollars per year due to the low levels of engagement (Clifford, 2015). Improving employee engagement has been shown to increase operational metrics including profitability, productivity, safety, attendance, and revenue (Rath & Harter, 2014). Despite the large turnover in companies there are workers who remain in employment in stressful work environments far beyond the average. The focus of the study is on examining the perceptions of workers concerning the reasons behind employment beyond the average 4.5 years in what the employee considers a difficult job environment despite the circumstance, estimated dangers, or risks to health.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study are:

1. What are the common reasons employees in the fields of outdoor work, manufacturing and restaurants stay in their employment for over five years despite challenging work environments?

2. What commonalities and differences were noted in reasons for remaining in employment for the three different work environments (outdoor work, manufacturing, restaurant)?

**Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of workers concerning the reasons behind long-term employment in what the employee considers a difficult job environment despite the circumstances, estimated dangers, or risks to health. A phenomenological research design was selected for this study to allow for the use of personal conversations through interviews and to gather insight into the perspective of participants. Phenomenology studies are focused on exploring the experiences of a phenomenon and transcribing them into understandings that identify the phenomenon based on human experience.
(Creswell, 2006). This type of research using a phenomenological approach is appropriate for studying life experiences of humans including health, stress, and quality of life as in this study, because it provides insight into perceptions and perspectives regarding a specific phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

Transcendental phenomenology is the process of seeing things fresh as if they have not been realized before (Creswell, 2006). In transcendental phenomenology, the experiences of participants are collected through the processes of bracketing, analyzing the data and researching themes. The overall intent of phenomenological research is to tell an overall story based on the experiences of the participants. Through bracketing, the researcher abandons any personal experiences to capture the phenomenon from the perception of the participant (Creswell, 2016). Since all questions presented to participants for this study were structured alike, bracketing, or setting aside personal experiences during the data collection process, was exercised, by me as the researcher, at the data collection stage and throughout the analyzation process.

When the data was analyzed, paradigm thinking was used to develop an analysis of narratives with the intent to identify themes that were common across the participant stories. A textural description, description of the participant experience, and a structural description, an interpretation of the context influencing the experience, was developed (Creswell, 2006). Participants during the interviews provided an oral history of personal reflections of their workplaces. A theoretical lens was used to determine the perspective of the participant as an employee who worked in a difficult workplace to capture that experience (Creswell, 2006). Restorying, the process of reorganizing stories and creating a framework, was used to draw an account of the overall stories of all participants both individually and collectively (Creswell, 2006).
The categories of industries selected for the study were taken from research conducted by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio (2016). Researchers for the Harvard study queried employee’s perceptions of the workplace, health, health benefits, experiences of sickness, effect of the workplace on health, dangers of the job, stress, employer support, and use of paid vacations. The report showed that of employees who reported workplace related health concerns, 43% were construction workers, 30% were factory workers, and restaurants and schools fared equally at 21%. These stressful workplaces, as indicated by the research, were used to identify targeted industries for the dissertation study.

**Research Population and Sampling Method**

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for this study. The underlying assumption of purposive sampling is that researcher knowledge of participants is necessary for the selection process from the population (Creswell, 2006). The criteria for selection of participants included: the participant was employed in either the outdoor work, manufacturing, or restaurant industry for at least five years prior to retiring or leaving employment. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to use judgment when selecting participants for the study (Dudovskiy, 2017).

Snowballing additionally was used for this study. This snowballing sampling is a strategy where participants assist in the recruitment of additional participants for the study (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). Through the process for this study, contacts referred others to me who might meet the study criteria and be willing to participate in the study.

Criteria for participation in the study included: individuals who worked for five years or longer in either of the three environments, outdoor work, manufacturing, or restaurants and are currently no longer employed at the prior work location identified in the study. Participants were
from workplaces that employed between 20 to 25 employees on the low end to more than 600,000 on the high end. Additionally, participants were employed in one of the three industries, Outdoor Work, Manufacturing, or Restaurant for over five years but have subsequently left the job. The duration of the break from the former employment was no longer than ten years. For the study, 26 potential participants met the criteria for the study and were selected to participate in interviews. One participant was out of the country and was not able to participate during the data collection period. There were 25 participants who were included.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews, which consisted of both a structured and a flexible interview process, were used for this study (Adams & Lawrence, 2013). There were eight questions posed to each participant in the exact same order simulating structured interviews. However, I asked follow up questions when content was vague or responses were incomplete. When a participant would move away from the question, the researcher would again ask the study question redirecting the participant. According to Padillia-Diaz (2015), the interview is the most appropriate strategy for collecting data in a phenomenological study.

Length of interviews and the time needed for responses were determined by participants. The questions were designed to explore the perceptions of the work environment based on the experience of the participant. The eight questions were regarding the environment and culture in which the participant previously worked. Chan, Fung, & Chien (2013) cautioned that the way questions are presented can affect the story. Care was taken to present the questions to each participant in the same order and through the same construct. Through interviewer-led interaction, questions queried the work environment, perceptions of difficulty experienced,
stressors, and reasons for staying longer than five years. Questions were designed to avoid asking leading questions that steer the interview (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

**Data Collection Procedures**

A prescreening survey was sent to 30 potential participants inviting them to participate in the study. Snowball sampling was used to reach saturation. From the pool of respondents, 26 potential participants met the criteria for the study and were selected to participate in interviews. One participant was out of the country and was not able to participate during the data collection period. There were 25 participants who were included. Criteria included: participants were able to select if they were from workplaces that employed between 20 to 25 employees on the low end to more than 600,000 on the high end. Participants had to select if they were employed in one of the three industries, Outdoor Work, Manufacturing, or Restaurant. Identification was made to determine if the participant had left employment with their prior workplaces, a requirement for eligibility. Participant gender and length of time in the last position was included in the survey.

Once participants were identified, contact was made to each to schedule a time for individual interviews. Each participant was required to sign a consent form for participation in the study. Eight interviews were done in-person and 17 were done by phone. In-person interviews were conducted at participant homes and public places. Phone interviews were at the discretion of the participant. All interviews conducted were in the format of one-on-one conversations. All participants were asked for their permission to record the conversations. Recordings were captured on a secure iPad device with cloud storage.

Through the interview process, participants shared an oral history of recalled events from their workplaces (Creswell, 2006). In addition to the recorded conversation, I made handwritten
notes to address any questions related to information received. Questions were asked of the participants immediately. Allowing reflection of feelings and self-revelation are a thoughtful part of the interview process (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Paraphrasing and summarizing was used to make sure researcher was properly collecting information shared. Member checks, an act of verification by the participation of both data collected and the researcher’s interpretation, were also used during the interview process (DeVault, 2016). Bracketing, or putting aside one’s own personal understanding and giving attention to newfound curiosities, was used to help prevent researcher bias during interviews and data collection (Creswell, 2006).

**Operationalization of Attributes**

The study looks at employees who have worked for longer than five years in difficult environments. The phenomenon of the study is the insights gained from participants who have worked in difficult environments. Through narrative research strategies, the participants of the study are asked to share their perspectives as they relate to the environments in which they worked. There is an effort by the researcher to explore a paradigm through conversations (Creswell, 2006). A response to a question might be whether the participant considered the environment difficult, or easy in which to work. Responses may be in either direction. Also considered is that workers may have changed jobs internally once or many times.

There are three industries studied, outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurants. Perceptions of work related stressors have been experienced across all three of these workplace industries (Harvard T.H. Chan study for National Public Radio, 2016). Difficult or toxic work environments are filled with negativity (Anderson, 2013). This environment can impact an employee’s self-worth where stress and strain contribute negatively in the physiological and psychological health of the employee (McHugh, 2012, Rath & Harter, 2010).
Data Analysis Procedures

Data collected during interviews was transcribed and initially coded using Atlas Ti and eventually manually with Microsoft Excel. The content of interviews was broken down in several ways to include by industry, by participant, by and individual questions, and kept wholly intact for understanding of the story. Content of the interviews was analyzed to deduce themes (Creswell, 2006). This horizontalization helped to look at the data through a clear lens without bias (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Since the interviews were fully transcribed and were in structured formats, the process to collect data across each question or industry was possible. Information was captured regardless of relevance to ensure no bias.

The coding of data involved data reduction and reconceptualization (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Research data was broken down, segmented, and categorized to complete a process to garner new questions and levels of interpretation. The Hycner’s (1999) five step model was used for coding. The steps include: bracketing and phenomenological reduction; delineating units of meaning; clustering of units of meaning to form themes; summarizing the interview; and extracting unique themes.

Themes were determined in each of the industry groups individually and then all three industries were collectively reviewed for any comparable themes. Another set of themes were discovered in the individual stories of participants. Themes were then narrowed down to identify those most outstanding in the research in order to begin recording individual life experiences (Creswell, 2006). The process of restorying, or rewriting the stories as told to share the workplace experience, was used to highlight the essence of the phenomenon as it was experienced and explained (Creswell, 2006). Through restorying, a textural description portraying actual experiences, and a structural description including participant explanations of
any contributors such as conditions or situations, was used to draw the overall picture as presented by the participant (Creswell, 2006).

**Limitations of the Research Design**

Participants were asked to reflect on past experiences in the workplace and respond to a list of questions asked to ascertain their perception of the workplace and their reasons for staying in an environment that some perceive as difficult. Potential limitations of using phenomenological research for this study were subjectivity, researcher bias, data interpretation, and small sample groups (van Manen, 1990). Subjectivity is a part of what makes the story personal to each participant (Cook, 2015). The use of a semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask clarifying questions during interviews. Researcher bias was addressed with bracketing. Data interpretation was addressed through paraphrasing and repeating for identification of content. The survey has 25 participants within three industries.

By interviewing retirees and prior employees, the risk of possible limitations from employees who were hesitant to discuss their work environments because of reprisal was greatly reduced or eliminated. Participants were open and honest and had much to say. There was a concern that a participant whose agenda was to disparage their work environment for personal reasons might be dishonest during the interview. Participants were all be treated equitably and with dignity and respect through the interviews. Questions asked were done throughout all interviews in a like manner. Closed and open-ended questions provided participants the opportunity to provide necessary input if they would like to. Participants of the study were advised of their right to withdraw at any point in the process. All participants were informed of the confidentiality of the study.
Validation

One common strategy to increase trustworthiness is the use of corroboration (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). During interviews, participants were encouraged to be open and honest in their responses (Shenton, 2004). Conversations captured in interviews were transcribed through very judicious efforts. Rich and thick description provided very deep and insightful conversations through participant responses. All content was transcribed as spoken by participants. This included a prolonged visiting and revisiting of the content (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

To increase study credibility, member checks were conducted. To ensure accuracy of data as questions were responded to, checks were performed on the spot (Shenton, 2004). Handwritten manual notes were taken during interviews and all data written was repeated to participants to ensure content was as intended. Iterative questioning was used to maintain clarity. During one question, a participant stated the only stressful part of the job was the people and went on to talk about employees. In a following question, which asked about stressful situations, the participant stated the customers and contractors were very stressful. I then asked follow-up questions to clarify the participant response. The participant provided additional content which was noted and recorded. To prevent negative case analysis or redefinition of the hypothesis by the researcher, material was analyzed without identifiers (Shenton, 2004). All topics were identified and all themes listed regardless of instances with which they were portrayed in the study.

Dependability related to whether a repeated study done in a similar context would return similar results (Shenton, 2004). The findings of the study are written with explicit detail based on the data collected. This enables the material to be replicated if necessary. Information
regarding the collection of data, questions asked, consolidation of data, and research methods are outlined throughout the process.

Conformability states that the findings are based on the experiences of the participants and not the ideas of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). Through bracketing, bias was minimized and participant responses to questions were captured as stated. Participants were allowed to add any content they deemed important while answering the question. Purposive sampling was used to increase study transferability.

**Expected Findings**

Anticipated findings were that employees will adjust to the difficulties experienced when others do so as well. In these environments, employees would work through troubling situations as long as there is someone else experiencing the same issues within the environment. An additional expected finding is that the formation and growth of relationships is a driver to longevity in difficult environments.

**Ethical Issues in the Study**

Participants were asked to reveal personal aspects of their work environment and the experiences they had in the workplace. Use of *Belmont Report Principles* ensured respect for all involved (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). No deception was used in this study. Participants were informed of the intent and expectations of this research and there was no coercion. No debriefing was needed. Only those who signed the informed consent were allowed to respond to interview questions as a volunteer of the research.

Participation is completely voluntary, and it is through snowballing that additional participants will be identified and invited to volunteer. As potential participants are identified,
all will be treated equally. Participants will be informed of their confidentiality and that identity is to be completely protected. There are no monetary benefits expected by the researcher.

The codes linking participants to their names were in a separate file and stored in a cloud environment that is secure. Participants were informed they could decline to respond to any question or to drop out of the study without penalty. In the case a participant would withdraw, any collected data would not be used for the study. No interviewed participants withdrew. The completed questionnaire received from participants was read back to each individual in the interviews to ensure accurate collection of information provided.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to examine the perceptions of workers concerning the reasons they remained beyond the average 4.5 years of employment in perceived difficult job environments despite the circumstances, estimated dangers, or risks to health. This phenomenological approach was used to capture common experiences through interviews with participants (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The research population consisted of participants who retired from or left the perceived difficult environments. Covered in this chapter was the methodology used to conduct a phenomenology research study intended to collect data used to provide additional information to the field of workplace culture and environment. Within the next chapter are the data findings and results of the information collected during the interviews with the participants.
Chapter 4: Research and Findings - Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the reasons people stay employed in difficult work environments for longer than five years. This type of longevity in the workplace contrasts with the BLS report that the average length of employment is 4.5 years. Investigated for the study were employees who remained employed for over five years in jobs in outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurants despite the difficult environments or working conditions experienced. For this phenomenological study, 25 participants were interviewed.

The factors surrounding the research were taken through individual interviews done in person and by phone with 25 participants. Initial contact was made through a demographic survey created and distributed through Qualtrix. In this demographic survey, participants responded to a list of questions that provided information such as length of time in industry prior to leaving, type of industry, work location, gender, and year of birth. This information was requested to provide the ability to determine if there were any comparisons to responses across fields and in any of these demographic breakdowns. Generational identifications were determined based on birth year as an added possibility for comparisons of responses.

All participants worked in their environment for a minimum of five years with a range from five to more than 30 years employment in the prior workplace. Participants either left through resignation, retirement, or the dissolution of the company or local work location.

Participants represented workplaces that employed between 20 to 25 employees on the low end to more than 600,000 on the high end. Eight interviews were completed in person and 17 by phone. All interviews conducted were in the format of one-on-one conversations and recorded with participant approval.
Research Questions

The findings are related to each of the research questions. These findings represent participant responses gained through their stories shared as they relate to the research questions. The primary research question asks the predominant question and information provided chronicles the individual experiences of each of the participants. The interviews provided participant responses that crossed multiple themes and categories. The secondary research question derives a perspective on the commonalities or differences across each of the three categories and a deeper insight into the comments received from the primary research question.

Listed are the research questions that provided the foundational construct of this study:

1. What were the common reasons employees in the fields of outdoor work, manufacturing and restaurants remained in their employment for over five years despite challenging work environments?

2. What were commonalities and differences noted in reasons for remaining in employment for the three different work environments (outdoor work, manufacturing, restaurant)?

Eight interview questions were developed to guide participants through providing insight into the two research questions. The interview questions are available in Appendix E. Questions were presented to participants in a semi-structured interview. Participants were permitted to respond and add any content they would like related to the questions asked. Some participants went into more depth than others with interviews that lasted from about 15 minutes to 45 minutes each. The majority of the interviews were about 30 minutes. With the ability to add any comments, participants provided open feedback on their workplaces and prior work experiences which created a rich and deep conversation and data collection. The stories provided insight into
reasons for remaining in tough environments. Participants shared their perspective of how the workplace impacted their decision making process in whether or not to remain with the organization. This information is gleaned from the participant responses.

Description of the Sample

All participants of the study worked five years or longer in the perceived difficult environments. Participants were no longer employed in the perceived difficult workplace prior to the interview. Participants included retirees, individuals who had resigned, and others who experienced company closures causing employees to be released. Table 1 shows the three industries, outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurant, that were the basis of the study and the number and percentages of participants interviewed in each group.

Table 1

Summary of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Work</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were from Missouri (48%), Illinois (36%), Arkansas (8%), Virginia (4%), and Puerto Rico (4%). The research conducted 25 interviews. Twelve of the 25 participants were retirees. Five participants were no longer employed at the prior workplace as a result of a closure. Eight participants voluntarily left their employment for other opportunities. Participants were employed at 10 different companies represented in the study. Industries represented
included two companies in the outdoor work industry, three companies in the manufacturing industry, and five restaurants.

Additional characteristics of the sample population of the study included generational identifications and whether participants who had left the workforce became free agents. Table 2 shows the breakdown for generational differences and transition to free agents.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth Date Range</th>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Free Agent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1943–1964</td>
<td>Baby Boomer</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965–1979</td>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980–2000</td>
<td>Millennial</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001–2013</td>
<td>Generation Z</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Baby Boomers and Generation X participants were present in the outdoor work category and in the manufacturing category. There was one Millennial in the manufacturing category.

Restaurant participants consisted of Millennials and one Generation Z. There were 12 males and 13 female participants interviewed for the study. Both male and female participants were in the outdoor work and the manufacturing categories. The restaurant category consisted of all females.

Among those interviewed, 48% were retired. There were 38.4% of the participants who left their companies and chose to become free agents securing work opportunities outside of the corporate structure. Free agents are one Baby Boomer who became a respiratory therapist and another who opened a not-for-profit organization helping the mentally ill, two Generation X
participants attended trucking school and began driving long hauls independently, and one
Millennial began work as a free agent selling for wineries. Two participants who left the
workplace, both Millennials, remained in the same field but chose to work for a different
company. The remaining six participants took government jobs or industry positions in different
fields.

Participants for Outdoor Work

Participants were invited to participate in the outdoor work category if they worked in a
position that consisted mainly of construction or outdoor type work. This would include anyone
who worked outside in the elements as well as those who performed the duties considered
construction or building of structures that required workers to be uncovered. The participants of
the study worked in two different outdoor work companies.

There were eight participants interviewed for the outdoor work category. Of the eight,
62.5% were male and 37.5% were female. There were 88% of the participants that were Baby
Boomers and 12% Generation X. Participants from Missouri were the largest group at 62.5%,
Illinois had 25% and Puerto Rico at 12.5%.

Participants for Manufacturing

Participants were invited to the manufacturing category if they worked in a position that
consisted of work in a manufacturing or plant setting. This would include anyone who worked
in locations that are comparable to auto manufacturers, business with plant operations, or
warehouses where materials or goods are managed and stored. The participants of the study
worked in four different manufacturing companies.
There were 11 participants interviewed for the manufacturing category and these eleven accounted for 44% of the survey participants. Of the eleven, 63.6% were male and 36.4% were female. There were 63.6% of the participants that were Baby Boomers, 27.2% were Generation X, and 9% Millennials. Participants from Missouri were the largest group at 63.6%, Illinois had 27.2% and Virginia at 12.5%.

Participants for Restaurant

Participants were invited to the restaurant category if they worked in a restaurant in any position. Respondents were both greeters or hostesses and servers. One participant was a buyer. There were six participants interviewed for the restaurant category and these six accounted for 24% of all survey participants. Of the six, 100% or all were female. There were 83.3% of the participants that were Millennials and 16.7% were Generation Z. No other generations were represented in the study for this category. Participants of the restaurant category included 50% were from Illinois, 33% from Arkansas, and 16.7% were from Missouri. Five different restaurants are represented in the study.

Research Methodology and Analysis

For this study, Husserlian phenomenology provided the methodological approach for the study. The purpose was to focus on participant experiences in the manner in which they took place (Groenewald, 2004). Husserl suggested that the natural attitude should not be taken for granted (Davidsen, 2013). There are universal experiences that connect those who have lived similar events (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The researcher should not allow preconceived notions to influence the outcome of theories, rather the experience learned through the research. By
focusing on the experience, the interviews provided a rich and thick understanding of the descriptions and narratives provided by participants regarding their lived experience (Davidsen, 2013).

Communication with initial participants provided recommendations for additional participants. Through this snowballing method, the initial population grew from seven to a total of 26 possible participants who all agreed to participate in the study. The snowballing method increased the number of companies represented as well as a larger participant base in each of the three categories of outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurant, which helped to develop a diverse output of data.

The Husserlian method was used to help identify commonalities of the lived experiences of participants. To prevent researcher bias, horizontalization was applied (Davidsen, 2013). By removing all identifiers such as the categories of outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurant, and the interviewee names, participants became people who were involved in workplaces considered difficult rather than being compartmentalized. The data was analyzed through the individual responses which allowed me to remove all prior understanding of repeated readings in an effort to gain the essential meaning behind the lived experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Through repeated analyzation of the data, understanding the story told by each participant was possible. Researcher questions were removed to obtain an open picture of what participants were sharing in their own words. Phenomenology provides the means to capture the experience in the manner in which it occurred (Davidsen, 2013). Husserl introduced phenomenological reduction to address the problem of allowing personal beliefs to impede our findings (Davidsen, 2013). Each story was read to gain an understanding of the participants’ personal connections to what was experienced in the workplace.
Through analyzation of the data, saturation was reached in some areas of the research. Participants communicated that workplace relationships were important, money and benefits affected reasons for staying, and that good or supportive managers were impactful with decisions to stay. Although these segments of data had become repetitive, they were profoundly important in decisions made regarding the working environment.

**Coding of Data**

The act of generating data is the educational development of the reader as this where the material begins to speak (van Manen, 1984). Coding of data in phenomenological research, according to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), involves data reduction and then reconceptualization of the data. Data is broken down and segmented into noncomplex categories. The process further involves disentangling and then clustering the data to forge new questions and interpretation levels.

In order to code the data, I used Hycner’s (1999) five step model. The steps were: bracketing and phenomenological reduction; delineating units of meaning; clustering of units of meaning to form themes; summarizing the interview; and extracting unique themes. A snapshot of the coding process is located in Appendix D. Ultimately, this is where the themes around which the phenomenology is determined are woven (van Manen, 1984).

**Summary of the Results**

The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio (2016) study labeled outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurants as difficult environments. To determine whether the participants from each of the environments agreed that they worked in difficult environments, the research included questions that queried participants to allow them to identify their view of difficulty in their workplace. The two specific questions asked were: “Would you
say others considered the work or workplace easy or difficult in which to work? In what ways?” and “Would you describe the workplace as easy or difficult in which to work? In what ways?”

The findings are shown in Figure 1.

![Difficult Work - All Participants](image)

**Figure 1.** Difficult work, questions 4 & 5.

The findings show participants across all three categories, outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurants, responded that 56% of their co-workers would say the workplace was difficult with their personal response at 56% agreeing it was difficult. Participants stated that 12% of their co-workers or peers did not find the environment difficult compared to 32% stated they personally did not find it difficult. Regarding how others felt, 32% of participants stated they believed only some coworkers would say it was difficult. Regarding self, the response “both” was used to describe the workplace meaning it was both difficult at times and not difficult at times. A total of 12% of participants felt it was both.

Participants of manufacturing stated 64% of their peers found the environments difficult while only 55% of participants agreed it was difficult. Outdoor work participants stated 63% of their peers would consider the environment difficult while 75% of participants found it difficult.
A total of 33% of participants of the restaurant category found their environments difficult also felt that 33% of their peers felt it was difficult. Half or 50% of participants in the restaurant group stated the environment was not difficult while they felt only 17% of their peers would say it was not difficult. Figure 2 shows respondents and difficult work broken down by categories.

![Difficult Work by Industry](image)

**Figure 2.** Difficult work by industry.

Reasons for the difficult environments in the manufacturing category were stated as work conditions, expectations of leaders or the job, being pushed, mandates, and disrespect. In the outdoor work category, reasons were listed as pressure to do more, working conditions such as weather or physical conditions, and difficult management. For restaurants, reasons included conditions, personalities, difficult managers, and attitudes of people were listed as factors creating difficult environments. The consensus across all categories, manufacturing, outdoor work, and restaurants was that more than half of the participants (56%) felt their environments were difficult in which to work.

Participants had varying ideas of their views of difficult workplaces despite the research and conditions that existed. Through bracketing, researcher bias is minimized. During the data
analyzeation process, data was reviewed in multiple ways. By removing categories, questions, or participant identifies, different possibilities of viewing the data were presented. Each provided an opportunity to look at the data without research bias. Taking away participant names meant any possible knowledge of the person was minimized. The different methods helped to see commonalities and provided greater depth of insights. Through this method, the idea that employees stay in difficult environments showed that it was more about the person and how their expectations of the workplace correlate with who they are. The participants work ethic was a major influence in whether they decided to endure within an environment that was difficult.

Description of the Themes

Themes were identified for each of the categories of difficult work environments based on the participant responses. The top six themes related to reasons employees stayed in the difficult environment were shared by 92% of participants and were shared from individuals in each of the three categories of outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurant. The top six themes experienced and communicated were:

- Ability developed to cope with negative environmental factors
- Positive workplace relationships
- What I like – Passionate about their work
- Commitment to the goals of the organization
- Good and supportive managers
- Money and benefits – Company offering attractive compensation and benefits packages

The six themes are listed in Figure 3.
Figure 3. Themes based on number of participant responses.

*Ability developed to cope with negative environmental factors* is a theme that refers to responses from participants in how they imparted efforts to do whatever they felt necessary to work through perceived workplace challenges. Coping responses were varied and particular to each participant. There were 44% of participants who responded they had some coping mechanism that helped them in the workplace. This theme was across all three categories. Coping was accompanied by comments of personal traits.

Ability developed to cope with negative environmental factors was discussed by 25% of participants in the outdoor work group, 64% of participants in the manufacturing group, and 33% of participants in the restaurant group. Coping is a theme that represents responses from participants related to how participants described their efforts to do what was necessary to work through their perceived workplace challenges. Responses in the coping theme are particular to each participant. Overall, 44% of participants commented regarding some coping mechanism.

In outdoor work, Jack stated, “You have to have tenacity to work through the unpleasant times because there is always going to be a better time. You do learn and you do grow.” Wanda from outdoor work stated, “I think sometimes in business you have to set your personal feelings
aside” Members of the manufacturing and restaurant groups made similar comments. Lyn from manufacturing stated, “Sometimes you have to overlook a lot of things and hope for the best.” Rennie from manufacturing stated he would share with others, “My words were it will get better, you will find a better position just keep trying and hang on.” Kelly from restaurant stated, “You have to step outside of yourself.” Rennie from manufacturing stated, “You should just have a positive mind. If you survive you should just keep going. You don’t give up.” Wendel, also from manufacturing, stated, “You have to have the mind to say I can do this and I have to do this.”

Jeff from manufacturing stated,

I don’t want to say you feel like you are locked in, but you feel like this is the decision you have to make at this time either to continue or to seek other employment or a career. I decided, and it was really like a decision, to just keep it as a career and do the best I could in the company for my family.

Bobby from manufacturing referred to safety when commenting on his thoughts on coping and stated, “You have to have your mind right when you walk in the door because everything, safety will either hurt you or kill you. Pay attention.” Ralph from manufacturing related work ethic to his reason for staying as he stated, “It was just having a positive attitude coming from a family that has a work ethic.”

From restaurant, Cynthia stated, “If people aren’t able to turn off that switch and not wear their emotions on their sleeves it would definitely get the best of them in this fast-paced environment.” Donna from manufacturing stated,

It was easy for me because it didn't matter what they said in the end, I was going to speak out and still do my job regardless what was going on. Continue to do your job regardless what’s going around you and don’t be fearful to voice your
concerns. A lot of people don’t want to be back-balled, so they suffer in silence. If you do your job there’s not a lot that can be done to you.”

Positive workplace relationships were experienced by connections participants made with other workers in the workplace. Relationships were shared regarding people with whom participants worked as well as those for which they worked. Participants in all categories discussed some form of relationship that was a part of their work environment and talked about the importance of that relationship and the impact it had on their day to day work. There were 44% of participants who responded they experienced positive working relationships and this theme was present in all three categories.

Positive workplace relationships of a supportive nature was another common theme in 38% of participants in outdoor work, 36% of participants in manufacturing, and 67% of participants in the restaurant category. Relationships are the connections made in the workplace that promote a positive working environment for those involved or who interact with one another. Participants of each of the three categories of outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurant commented about relationships. Overall, 44% of all participants commented regarding workplace relationships.

Participants spoke of their experiences with others in the workplace positively and gave examples of their perceptions of the relationships. Wally from outdoor work stated, “I enjoyed it there. The people I worked with. For the most part, union and company people.” Jack from manufacturing stated, “I was lucky to make a lot of good friends there and it’s a place where friendships continued after retirement.” Rennie from manufacturing stated, “I had some fantastic people to work with.” Tessa from manufacturing stated, “Also because the environment had great coworkers to be with.
There was a lot of teamwork that I haven't seen since I left there.” Cynthia from restaurants also provided her perspective of relationships, “Being able to interact with my guests and develop lifelong friendships.” Debbie from restaurants stated, “Once you find your regulars and they come in to see you, you do go for them. They make it worth coming in.” Kelly from restaurants stated, “You build bonds and relationships with your coworkers because you spend long hours with them. So if you are looking to work and not build a rapport, then food service isn’t for you. The friendships kept me there.” Paris from outdoor work stated,

I got along well with the people on my route. They seemed to like me in return. The people I worked with were all decent people along the line. Sometimes they were forced to do things they didn’t want to do too but they were all decent people.

Bobby from manufacturing stated,

You get along great with the people you work with and you tend to move in the same direction they are going and maybe the same job status. For example, everybody worked in the same department. Coworkers, we pretty much all got along great, everybody had a crew, it didn’t matter if you worked on the same crew. We all knew each other, we would say Hi and talk, shoot the stuff for a minute when either going home or coming in.

Kelsey from restaurants stated,

There are times when you disagree with your manager or with a guest or with another team member, but at the end of the day, this is such a great group of people to fall back on because you guys get so close working so close together.
The theme of relationships allowed participants to present an aspect of someone other than themselves and their beliefs about that connection in the workplace. Whether the relationships were positive, or participants found them to cause issues, the topic was presented often enough that a theme emerged. Relationships held importance in the lives of the participants which was displayed in their conversations.

*What I like or want* was a theme shared by participants when describing personal characteristics they found important. What I like or want was expressed in all three categories and shared by 40% of participants of the study. Associated concepts were expressed as what participants enjoyed, what they were good at, and their individual needs.

What I Like or Want was a theme of 38% of participants in the outdoor work category, 36% of participants in manufacturing, and 50% of participants in the restaurant category. The What I like or want theme was derived from participants who commented about things related to their job or what aspect of the work environment they like. Participants freely stated these comments in response to the interview questions.

Participants commented regarding how they like to work such as Lorraine from outdoor work who stated, “You operate independently and that was really important to me.” Kathy from manufacturing had a similar comment, “I had the opportunity to make things the way I wanted and make it my own.”

Others commented about what they liked to do prior to the job and this was still how they felt. Shawn from outdoor work stated, “I was kind of a construction guy all my life.” Wally from outdoor work stated, “I liked working construction.” Ryan from manufacturing stated, “I liked more hands-on jobs.” Cynthia from restaurants stated, “I like to work in face paced environments and I didn't have to take my work home.” Kelsey from restaurants stated, “I do
like fast pace and I’m a sociable person, I’m pretty outgoing, so I enjoyed that kind of work. I didn’t mind hustling and bustling, I like that, I like to work fast.”

The theme of what I like or want was mentioned in participant conversation as they explained a connection to what they did in the workplace. The comments aligned with the Person-Environment Fit theory as participants provided insight into some of the reasons they believed they fit in their current workplace.

The theme C ommitment to the goals of the organization was experienced by participants in all three categories as well. Participants shared comments regarding their beliefs as to why they did what they did for the company during the period of time they stayed. Commitment was accompanied by comments of pride, dedication, and work ethic. Commitment to the goals of the organization was a theme from 38% of participants in outdoor work, 36% of manufacturing participants, and 33% of the restaurant participants.

Thomas from outdoor work stated, “I felt once I started moving up in the company and I saw my future getting better and better there was no reason for me to leave because I wanted to finish what I started.” Wendel from manufacturing stated,

You get out of that job what you put into it. You have to be a committed employee and have pride in your work. I always felt when I left at the end of the day, [company] got their money out of me because I cared.”

Working for a particular company was a commitment to some as well. Gerald from outdoor work stated,

I wanted to work for the [company]. So I knew that I had to stick to it no matter what, even through hard times in the beginning in order to just keep my job and persevere in that job. Not being able to accomplish [my work] in that amount of
time. But I wanted to, I wanted to real bad and I wanted to perform to their expectations but I never could and I never could. Even when I was 18 years into it and I was real comfortable with and real consistent and real conscientious about it, I could never meet their expectations. It just couldn’t happen. So I just realized that and just went on.

Debbie from the restaurant participants stated,

There are times when they don’t have people and I feel like in those times I really need to pick up. That’s when I start working more because I feel like I have to pick up the slack for the less people that are there. I still have this hold to the point where I feel like I need to make sure I am there for this company if they were to need me.

Commitment was shared by participants from each of the three categories. Participants discussed their commitment to either the company or to the job in their responses. Commitment was considered a theme because as participants would reflect, they included the why in their reasoning to some of the decisions they made. Understanding the impact of each person’s personal commitment from their perspective holds value for this study by including individual reasoning.

*Good and supportive managers* is a theme that crossed all three categories with 36% of participants sharing some experience that included a good or supportive manager. Participants discussed having worked with managers who were supportive to their needs. Participants stated these managers were a positive part of their work experience and related a connection to that manager and the workplace. Participants credited these managers with making the workplace better.
Good and supportive managers were highlighted by 38% of participants in the outdoor work category, 45% of manufacturing participants, and 17% of restaurant participants. Good managers is a theme selected from participant responses that identified managers who were a positive influence in the working relationship for the participant. Participants spoke of their experience with those they considered good managers.

Ralph from manufacturing stated,

Some of the people I worked for that were some really good people over the years which made me want to make them look good and being in the safety department to me that's a plus and I feel like I saved lives in my career and I just don't know who it is. I did appreciate the people I worked for. For the most part they were very motivating and that helped me to be motivated and motivate my staff and kind of trickle down.

Jeff from manufacturing stated, “The hardest part of the job is at those first couple of years and having a supervisor that you can confide in that you can be honest with and you can possibly have a flexibility in work hours.” Lyn from manufacturing stated, “Luckily, every situation that I did come across I was in the right and I had a manager that would stand behind me and stick up for me.”

Bobby from manufacturing stated,

You have to love the job what you are doing, and it helps to have a supervisor that you get along with. You know, some guys had crews they were on because they just loved that supervisor. He knew how to treat a guy. So, they would want to bid or get on his crew just to stay there.

Kelsey from restaurant stated,
I would tell them that the manager there, his name is Todd, he's a Godsend. He's a lovely guy. He's been there for about 15, 16 years now. And he’s definitely the face of the company. He's warm and welcoming. He runs a tight ship. He's very fatherly. He's seen me go through high school and go through college, so he's amazing. The manager will keep them there.

Wanda from outdoor work commented,

"I had the best of the league managers and he believed in me. He got me through seven-eight years and switched my view on management and to be successful without being disrespectful, demeaning, or belittling people to get to that point and created such a team atmosphere that I enjoyed coming to work."

References to good managers emerged as a theme as participants credited these managers with some aspect of making the work environment one they found positive. With each participant who commented about a good manager, there was credit given to the manager for something positive experienced by the participant.

The Money and benefits - Company offering attractive compensation and benefits packages theme was shared by 36% of participants across all three categories. Comments related to money were made by participants regarding their perception of the amount of pay received for the work performed, and the number of hours expected to work for pay received. Reference to benefits were related to a form of company benefits such as health and dental provided to workers. Money and benefits consisted of the belief that a specific amount of pay was necessary for the job to be worth the time spent performing in a certain manner. Within this theme was the belief there were benefits, security and retirement that added to the value of the
job performed for the wage received. Shared comments included good pay, good benefits, security, and retirement benefits.

Money and benefits or attractive company offerings was mentioned by 25% of the outdoor work group, 45% of the participants of the manufacturing group, and 17% of the restaurant group. Reference to benefits were related to a form of company benefit such as health and dental provided to workers.

Jack from outdoor work commented, “Very good source of security and income to raise my family.” Tessa from manufacturing commented, “The area I live in it was very good pay.” Bella from restaurants stated, “The money and the hours. I worked 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and walked out with a lot of cash. No matter how bad my day was I walked out with a lot of cash and got off early.”

Participants often combined their discussion of pay with mention of benefits. Kathy from manufacturing stated, “I left a job I really loved to come to this company. And it was for my family, good pay and good benefits.” Thomas from outdoor work stated,

You’re guaranteed 40 hours a week for your paycheck coming in as a union laborer, that's what was good about it because for today, nowadays everything is mostly part time or benefits are not there like healthcare and things that you might have to pay for on your own.

Some participants also commented they believed the jobs paid well. Wendel from manufacturing commented, “I was grateful to have that high paying job. That was a good paying job for a blue-collar worker that had great benefits with good health and dental.” Ryan from manufacturing stated, “Pretty decent hours, wonderful pay, great benefits and it was a great place
to work at as well.” Jeff from manufacturing stated, “The pay, as long as you know you are going to get raises at a certain time, we knew we were going to get a substantial raise.”

Money and benefits was a theme expressed by 36% off participants. The money and benefits category included concepts of retirement or mention of 401k. When asked the question regarding what participants would tell someone looking to work at that company that would make them want to stay longer than five years, money and benefits was the most common response.

Summary

This phenomenological research used a thematic approach to allow for the combinations of topics and themes presented. Common themes were found throughout all designated work categories. Husserl had an epistemological approach to phenomenology (Davidsen, 2013). Through this approach, the phenomenon is used to examine the experiences as revealed by each person. Husserl believed the subject and their experience were inseparable (Davidsen, 2013). The research as revealed through individual interviews followed Husserl’s phenomenological approach. While the interviews were occurring, member checks were conducted. Information was repeated to the participant for clarity and accuracy. Covered in Chapter 4 was a breakdown of the themes uncovered through coding. Participants shared their perceptions related to experiences in the workplace. Findings were included in the chapter for these participant reflections on their years of experiences and stories shared during the interview process. The next chapter will include an analysis of the results as they relate to the research questions. Each of the three work categories will be analyzed based on research questions to uncover the reasons, as indicated by stories, that the participants remained working in difficult environments longer than five years.
Chapter 5: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the analysis of results as related to the findings in the literature for the study designed to explore the reasons employees continue employment in companies for longer than five years despite factors related to dangers to health, disagreements with work practices and challenges in the workplace contributing to overall job dissatisfaction. Participants were solicited for the study with a requirement of having worked in one of three identified difficult environments of outdoor work, manufacturing, or restaurants. Participants must have worked in the difficult environments for at least five years. Interviews were conducted with a total of 25 participants across the three listed categories. Their experiences are the basis of this phenomenological study.

This study researched the reasons employees continue employment in companies for longer than five years despite factors related to dangers to health, disagreements with work practices and challenges in the workplace contributing to overall job dissatisfaction. According to a BLS report, the average length of employment is 4.5 years. The three industries that are outlined as the basis of this research are outdoor work, manufacturing, and restaurant. These three industries were identified in a study conducted by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for National Public Radio (2016) which identified difficult environments. Included in the list of employee perceptions of the workplace as researched for the Harvard study are:

- Health
- Health benefits
- Experiences of sickness
- Effect of the workplace on health
- Dangers of the job
- Stress
- Employer support, and
- Use of paid vacations as factors for identifying difficult environments

Discussion of the Results

Each participant had a story to tell about their workplace experience. Participants were open and honest and seemed open to talking about their work experience. The connection with the time spent in their prior workplace was evident as participants discussed past experiences and revisited some moments that may have been uncomfortable. One example of this was Gerald from the outdoor work category who commented on the inability to keep up, or work to the expectations given him, no matter how hard he tried through his 18 year tenure, signifying he indeed felt the workplace was problematic. Gerald’s connection with the workplace was very strong and he held great pride in working for the company, the uniform he wore, the history of the company, and he also connected it with other family who had also worked there in the past.

There were common reasons participants revealed they remained in employment despite difficult work conditions. Participants had a high level of commitment for the workplace where they were employed. Company prestige provides credibility (Pfeffer, 2018). A level of pride is attached to that commitment. These factors laid a foundation for some of the participants to push through challenges considered difficult.

Some participants did not have education beyond a high school level and believed that to be a deterrent to obtaining a higher paying job than the one they worked. In this way, money was a factor. The ability to achieve the salary desired or the ability to receive money quickly (tips) as was shared by participants who worked in the restaurants was a consideration.
Likewise, working for a good manager to whom participants could connect was a predictor of remaining in the difficult environment. In some cases, the manager was the cause of the difficult environment. The working relationship between employee and management was important in maintaining a good environment in which to work. Considering people and not conditions, supervisors or managers were stated as the cause of a difficult workplace over coworkers in all industries.

As mentioned in the Person-Environment Fit theory, participants voiced personal needs that drove decisions to make changes in their work decisions. Many employed coping mechanisms when they were not able to align with the needs of the company, yet they were not willing to leave. These personal needs were different for each participant and provided insight into individual perceptions of their workplace. Some participants who had competing factors such as a belief they could not obtain a better paying job used coping mechanisms in order to realign to the current workplace needs.

Multiple themes were revealed through analysis of the data. The stories told by participants included insights into why they stayed in the difficult environment. A summary of themes that relate specifically to the decision employees made to stay is included in Table 3 along with a list of concepts derived from the stories shared in the interviews. The themes are associated with the reasons workers remain in the workplace despite difficulties. Commonalities and differences related to reasons for staying were shared across all three categories.
### Summary of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Associated concepts</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability developed to cope with negative environmental factors</td>
<td>Personal traits, patience, personal orientations of self</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive workplace relationships</td>
<td>Friendships between coworkers, good relationships with managers or supervisors, like working with good people, people</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I like or want – passionate about</td>
<td>What I am good at, What I enjoy doing, What I know well, What I like, Individual needs</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to goals of the organization</td>
<td>Pride in serving, dedication, commitment</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good and supportive managers</td>
<td>Support, stand behind me, good bosses, manager who believed in me</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money &amp; benefits – Company offering</td>
<td>Good pay, retirement, benefits, security</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants throughout the study found ways to endure in their environments. They had the ability to develop a way to cope in the negative environment. The personal ability to remove self or induct some personal coping mechanism helped those who acknowledged the environment as difficult. Participants held a belief that things would get better, or that they could be worse.

Participants were cognizant of the impact of positive relationships experienced in the
workplace. These relationships resonated with participants providing a high response from all categories as the connection with those who participants interacted with in the workplace every day was important. Commonalities included that the people in the workplace included managers, supervisors, coworkers or peers, contractors, and customers. Each of these had the ability to affect relationships or change some dynamic of everyday work through positive or negative interactions.

Participants commented about what mattered to them and commonalities were shared across each category. Examples of these were shown in responses from those who worked in the outdoor work category as participants shared they liked working outdoors or liking construction, aligning themselves with their personal needs as well as those of the position and overall mission of the company which aligns with the Person Environment Fit theory. In manufacturing, participants commented they liked hands-on type work with the machinery they worked with. In restaurants, participants liked working in a fast-paced environment or helping others. Each of these are examples of personal needs or self-satisfaction of each participant.

Their performance and contribution to the organization was important to many participants. This was personal for participants. Each initially felt they were a good fit for the company, the job, and that they aligned with the mission. Their level of commitment continued until there was something that prevented the connection to remain. Often that was expressed as a conflict with management or something within the workplace environment, or some change that occurred. Commitment was common to participants and many commented of having a good work ethic, signifying a belief in their abilities in the workplace. Only after the discontent that caused disconnect was there a difference of opinion.

Having a good and supportive manager provided a common thread for participants to feel safe in the workplace. Participants expressed how having a supervisor they could talk to or one
who they knew had their back made a difference for them and their opinion of the workplace. Participants spoke highly of managers who provided guidance and autonomy as they performed their jobs. These supervisors and managers were stated to be sought after by employees and recommended by participants.

Participants commented that money and benefits were important. They spoke of the belief that a specific amount of pay was necessary for the job to be worth the time spent performing in a certain manner. Benefits, security, and retirement all added to the value of the job performed for the wage received. The discussion of money and benefits was widely responded to across all categories when participants talked about what they would tell others to keep them working as long as they did in that job or company. Another commonality was all retirees related to money and benefits as something they would offer others as a reason to work for the company.

**Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

Each participant held some belief regarding their experiences in the workplace and why they stayed. The Person-Environment Fit Theory suggests that both the person and the environment determine individual employee behavior (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). Participants changed their view of the company based on their specific needs and whether the company was in alignment with those needs. For those who left the difficult employment, the fit was no longer aligned. Robbins and Judge (2011) stated that people leave when employee values and the organizational culture are no longer compatible. The participants of the study were able to remain connected either through the relationships, or the workplace connections, or their own reasons as discussed in this study.

When dealing with difficult situations, some participants were able to disconnect from the difficulties. Resilience is a strategy of surviving workplace adversity (Jackson, Firtko, and
Edenborough, 2007). Finding ways to remind oneself that the current situation is not a reflection of oneself is important for employees (Anderson, 2013). Participants showed evidence of this through their comments related to coping in the workplace. Participants stated it was necessary to find ways to cope with the current situation or make a decision to leave it. Methods of coping were to control emotions, remove personal expectations relating to what was going on, focus on the value of the work performed, remember things will get better, and just deal with it. Participants were able to change their expectations of self to work with the environments around them.

Examined also are the needs of each employee as they relate to self. Each individual who found it possible to work through the difficulties was able to do this in an effort to satisfy themselves which helps to understand the five-year longevity. They all expressed a level of accomplishment in having achieved milestones for their own purposes. These are found in the associated categories of “What I like” displayed in Table 3 – Summary of Themes. The category is found in all three industries and includes “What I am good at,” “What I enjoy doing,” “What I know well,” and “What I like.” These themes seemed to help participants make the best of difficult days or experiences in the workplace.

Participants believed that when they focused on what they brought to the workplace, it helped them to be successful and made it possible to maintain a level of satisfaction with the current situation. These realizations helped participants focus on different aspects of the job such as what they do well and how they relate to customers or coworkers. Often this helped participants to bring a part of their own personality to the performance of duties. When this alignment was in place, participants connected with their duties.

One overarching theme found in each of the three categories of outdoor work, manufacturing, and construction, was the impact of relationships as realized by participants and
people they either worked with or came into contact with in the workplace every day. These relationships strengthened the bonds that kept participants in their workplaces. There are shared basic assumptions that make it possible for a group of employees to solve problems in the workplace (Schneider & Barbera, 2014). These are then taught to others and become the norm in the way employees respond to problems. Bonds are created and these bonds are influenced by the social environment even more than culture or leadership (McHugh, 2012).

Relationships built with coworkers or supervisors experienced were widely shared across all categories of industry in the study. Relationships in the restaurant group were built between the participants and coworkers as well as the participants and customers. These relationships carried on after leaving the workplace. Longtime coworkers in manufacturing and outdoor work linked participants to others through the similar experiences in the workplace. Participants shared stories of family bonds built in the workplace that kept the groups close. Participants talked of long hours spent in the workplace that helped these relationships to become rich and deep. Disagreements and difficult relationships were mentioned as well but comments were limited to individual issues and not overall workplace concerns. Negative comments were mostly related to supervisors or customers and rarely coworkers.

Factors of Age and Diversity Affecting Longevity

There were some factors realized regarding age and diversity. Each group seemed to fall within the confines of their generational definitions as described by Knight (2014) and Malburg (2016). Examples are that Baby Boomers are loyal and believe in the value of work and are loyal to the organization (Knight, 2014). None of the 14 Baby Boomers left their workplaces for different opportunities. The two who became free agents due to workplace closures continue to work. The 12 remaining Baby Boomers retired after working between 18 to 39 years.
Generation X focuses on work-life balance. The only participants who left the manufacturing or outdoor work categories were two Generation X participants. Both cited reasons that changes to the work environment were no longer in line with their needs and both moved on to jobs in different industries. Millennials are stated to want more freedom and flexibility in the workplace and this was evidenced in those who worked in the restaurant category.

Millennials represent the group more willing to leave for other opportunities (Meister, 2012). There were five Millennials and one Generation Z participant in Restaurant, all of whom left their workplaces. Generation Z are said to seek stability and structure. The one Generation Z participant fit this mold well and is the one who left the restaurant to join the military. She also was very dedicated to the relationships created during her time in the restaurant. The only group to completely leave the workplace was the restaurant group. Of those who left jobs for other opportunities, there were two Generation X, one in Manufacturing and one in Outdoor work, five Millennials all in Restaurant, and one Generation Z in Restaurant.

Although there were generational differences, each generational group was in line with what research says about their group (mentioned above). There did not appear to be a phenomenon based on longevity and the generations outside of examples given in this section. The anomaly was that Millennials statistically leave a workplace after 18 months, yet, those interviewed for this study remained in these jobs for five years or longer. Every person had their own reasons for remaining.

**Healthy Environments**

Despite the difficult environments, there were some instances of supportive managers who provided a positive work experience despite the challenges creating a healthy environment.
as referenced by Lagerstrom (2005). Several references were made to having good managers by representatives of all three categories. Participants shared that having a love of the job as well as a supervisor that they could get along with was important. This dynamic provided a place where coworkers sought to work for a supervisor who they could work for with dignity and respect. Once getting into that department, workers often stayed without changing to other departments in an effort to continue working for that supervisor.

One aspect of wellbeing is having a leader or manager who builds enthusiasm and friends to share it with in the workplace (Rath & Harter, 2010). An example of this was information shared by one participant was very happy with her manager and recalled that he was very accommodating, and she looked at him as a father figure. She held him in high regard referring to him as “amazing” and attributing her ability to stay there to his leadership. Another participant was dedicated to his leadership and felt some were good people which made him want to work to make them look good through his efforts. He commented these leaders were motivating and this helped him to motivate his team.

**Free Agents**

Free agents are those who have endeavored to create their future (Pink, 2001). The research shows that of the 25 participants who did not retire, 38% of them became free agents electing not to work in organized industry any longer. Pink (2001) suggests this is a trend that will grow. Free agents are free of the organizational bonds (Pink, 2001). Four of the participants chose to move into business for themselves after experiencing company closures. Two Generation X both became long haul truck drivers operating for themselves. One Baby Boomer opened several not-for-profit homes for the mentally challenged. The other Baby Boomer went back to school and became a respiratory therapist. For non-retirees, 38% became free agents
working for themselves. Three of these participants were from the same company. All four were in the manufacturing category. There was one free agent from the restaurant category who went into the wine business. The personalities of these participants fit well with their choices in their next venture. Both the Baby Boomers were dedicated to helping others. The two from Generation X took advantage of opportunities presented due to the closing of their plant and the one Millennial was focused on opportunities and growth previously learned from the restaurant business.

**Systems Thinking**

Systems thinking represents an event or outcome created by a unified group of activities or behaviors that act as a whole (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Hodgson & Midgley, 2014). Through systems thinking, the bigger picture of this research is examined. All industries of the study contained similar comments across many categories. There were generational commonalities which included Baby Boomers staying well beyond five years and Millennials leaving shortly after five years. Participants agreed they were a good fit for both the company and the jobs they performed. Several participants made comments such as, “In the beginning” indicating things changed along the way. Those changes impacted the desire to stay in the organization.

Bolman and Deal (2013) state that it is disengagement that impacts work locations negatively causing employees to give no more than their bare minimum in the workplace. It is unlikely that employees newly hired come to work with no desire to do a good job. Disengagement happens over a period of time and through impacts within the environment. Many of the participants continued to work very hard despite the challenges they encountered. Theoretical models on job satisfaction are also a part of The Person Environment Fit construct in addition to the needs-supplies fit between the employee and the job (Schneider & Barbera,
Addressing disengagement in the workplace will help employees remain in organizations.

Some participants were conscious of their lack of a higher degree and this did impact their decision to stay believing they could do no better elsewhere because of the lack of higher education. The ability to receive the desired level of pay along with the lack of more than a high school education was a factor for some who stayed. Some participants stayed until they were able to attain a higher level of education. There were no differences with gender in those who left for retirement.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study are the small sample size and reliance of truthfulness of participant responses. Retirees who have left the workplace may have a disparate recollection of past experiences. A total of 48% of the participants were retirees. Retirees may also hold a different perspective because they are no longer in the workplace.

There is a possibility that participants are not representative due to the sampling technique used. Through the use of the snowball sample, limitations may not lead to a representative sample, rather data used for exploratory purposes (Crossman, 2018). One possible limitation of content collection is the possibility for participants that there is no reason to have an opinion because they are no longer employed at that workplace and another limitation is participants may have a very negative perspective because of something that happened right before they left the workplace. Despite these limitations, participants seemed open and honest in their comments and responses about past employment experiences.
Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

The results of the study show that employees who remain in perceived difficult environments do so of their own free will and often because they have a connection with the work, the company, or the people. Consequences related to health and well-being were not at the forefront of the decision to stay or leave the challenging environment. Employees do not believe the physical and psychological toll experienced in the workplace is harming them and likewise, this same experience would be similar anywhere else (Pfeffer, 2018). The needs of the employee in this case are subordinate and the needs of the job become the focus. In the value-precept model, the actions of the individual are guided by the values as they relate to needs. In this case, the values of participants who stayed were related to their work ethic more than their need to acknowledge the challenging environment.

Employees who experience difficulty with workplace longevity can gain insights from this study by understanding first where they fit into the organization and environment and whether that fit is one they are willing to adjust. The organizational culture contributes to how fit changes over time. Likewise, the needs and desires of each person in the workplace may change over time as well. According to the participants of this study, a connection or relationship with others in the workplace helps to promote longevity. Rath and Harter (2010) stated relationships are a buffer in tough times improving cardiovascular functions and stress levels. Working with a supervisor or manager who also connects positively with their teams promotes solidarity. Understanding that environments do change and having a willingness to evolve with them is a choice. When coping mechanisms are the reason an employee can maintain in an environment, other factors have begun to increase job dissatisfaction. At this
point due to psychological wounds and stress, employees stay because they simply do not have the energy to leave (Pfeffer, 2018). Health and well-being may be impacted.

Organizations can also gain insights from participants who contributed to this study. The data shows the top six themes listed here represent 92% of the total participant responses and comments:

- Ability developed to cope with negative environmental factors
- Positive workplace relationships
- What I like – passionate about work
- Commitment to the goals of the organization
- Good and supportive managers
- Money & benefits – company offering

The use of coping mechanisms by employees is an indication that they have become disengaged. Participants who were expressed coping mechanisms were giving no more than necessary in the workplace. Comments were geared towards getting through the day and helping others to do the same. At this point, a decision is made to stay, although, leaving is not off the realm of possibility.

Understanding the importance of companies (and leaders) connecting with employees helps to improve the working relationship, thus improving engagement and longevity. Creating environments that promote healthy working relationships alone addresses the greatest belief shared by participants as 44% of all participants mentioned relationships in their conversations about the workplace. Where there were great relationships, participants were able to manage through the tough situations experienced. Quality relationships play a role in overall health (Rath & Harter, 2010). A key note here is that positive and supportive supervisors or managers
were also a large part of that success. Social relationships that offer someone to talk to and provide emotional support reduce stress (Pfeffer, 2018).

The concept of good and supportive managers goes inline with relationships. There is a workplace connection where a supportive manager provides a feeling of safety for members of their teams. Connecting positively with the leader helps to make the mission visible and possible to achieve. Stress is easily created through the employee/supervisor relationship and relieving this improves engagement.

Considering what I like and money and benefits, providing environments where employees both thrive in doing meaningful work in which they can connect and realize their value was just as important as good pay and benefits. What I like received 40% of participant comments and money and benefits received 36%.

While money and benefits and what I like were reasons for staying, commitment to the job was a driver of the personal desire to stay. Pfeffer (2018) stated the power of commitment and the effect on the psychological process that causes people to raise their level of investment, helping them to see things differently and realign their decisions including revaluing opinions about the job.

Employee longevity in the workplace is determined by each person in their own way. The message revealed showed that healthy and respectful relationships are paramount in the workplace. Participants who experienced great relationships were happy to speak of them and this was a great takeaway from the interviews. Likewise, bad supervisors or managers who created negative relationships were just as powerful in the memories of participants. Personal needs of each employee are important to them and their contribution to the workplace. When participants believed these needs mattered, employee longevity was strengthened. Participants
believed they had a solid work ethic and were committed to working. Once the commitment is made, this triggers a level of psychology that causes an increased investment by each employee (Pfeffer, 2018).

Personal dedication and the desire to achieve was great in the participants interviewed. Retirees who were interviewed shared through their story that they believed they were hard workers who further connected to the work they performed. Non-retirees who left the workplace after five years had a similar story, albeit they were not willing to stay after some change occurred that made the workplace different for them. There were conversations about the workplace and those with whom they worked. When coworkers were adjusted to the difficult environments, it seemed as though participants felt the need to do so as well. People tend to synchronize with those around them (Rath & Harter, 2010). People find it difficult to complain about an environment where others are managing through (Pfeffer, 2018). Another concept of personal dedication was linked to family. Participants who had relatives that worked in these environments were influenced by following in the footsteps of those relatives. Participants mentioned having uncles, brothers, or other family members who worked for these companies. This was shared with pride and impacted the desire or decision to stay. Therefore, toughing it out demonstrates competency and dedication, a badge of honor (Pfeffer, 2018).

The personal work ethic of those who stay is a driver to the reason they remain in these environments. Employees who remain in difficult environments have made a decision to see it through. Their belief in their work ethic is deeper creating the need to show loyalty because of who they are. To leave would mean they did not succeed. Quitting means you are a quitter (Pfeffer, 2018). Even those who left had a feeling of not reaching some internal level of desired achievement. Commitment to the position and workplace was a theme shared by 32% of all
participants. Providing work environments that support these dedicated employees improves health and well-being, productivity, and longevity.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Further research into personal needs of workers in the workplace would help to delve deeper into the reasons individuals seek to satisfy self. All participants expressed a commitment to the values of the companies in which they worked. They were determined to do well and felt they did until some need went unmet. This need may have changed over the course of their tenure and may have been met when they started working for the company. Studies of individuals who are currently working in these environments for longer than five years may provide some insights into current physical working conditions and personal motivations for staying. Employees who have intrinsic motivation to perform well are a gem to find. Understanding what drives that intrinsic motivation in a difficult environment might further add to the research on this topic.

**Conclusion**

Those who participated in the study stayed in the difficult environments for longer than five years. Once a decision was made to continue in those environments, the contributing factor was that person’s work ethic and desire to stay. The underlying reason for staying was the participants opinion of their work ethic. This was revealed across all three work industries of the study. When the employees believed they were good employees and were willing to give everything to the job, they continued to do so. Fellow employees in the same positions and their interaction in the workplace as well helped participants build on their opinion of themselves. When participants were in disagreement with changes to the work environment, based on the
effect it had on them, they stayed only if they believed their work ethic was enough to get them through. Once it was challenged, they were at the point to make a decision whether to stay or go.

The people who participated in this study were phenomenal. They spoke openly and honestly about workplace experiences that were sometimes difficult and painful. Many sought to explain why they found it necessary to leave while others who left due to closures were saddened they no longer had those opportunities regardless of the difficulties. This speaks to the quality of those who work in these fields considered difficult environments. The participants of the study are a tiny subset of many who perform in these positions and continue to do so everyday despite the challenges to health and well-being. The study concludes with the understanding that each person decides what drives their desire to stay and as long as a connection exists, they do just that.
References


Lopez, K., & Willis, D. (2004). Descriptive versus interpretive phenomenology: Their


Swanson, A. (2015). *Researching says your bad boss may be making you sad, lazy and fat.*


Appendix A: Questions from the Survey Interviews

1. Was the company a good fit for your career or personal needs? Why or why not?
2. Would you say you were a good fit for the job you performed? Why or why not?
3. Would you say you were committed to the values of the company and if so, in what ways?
4. Would you say others considered the work or workplace easy or difficult in which to work? In what ways?
5. Would you describe the workplace as easy or difficult in which to work? In what ways?
6. What stressful situation, if any, did you experience in the performance of your duties in the workplace?
7. If you had a friend looking for a job, what would you tell them about the organization that would make it worth staying longer than 5 years?
8. What would you like to add?
Appendix B: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:
• Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test

• **Statement of Original Work (Continued)**

• Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting

• Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project

• Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University-Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

Digital Signature

Loretta Tolliver

Name (Typed)

October 2, 2018

Date